



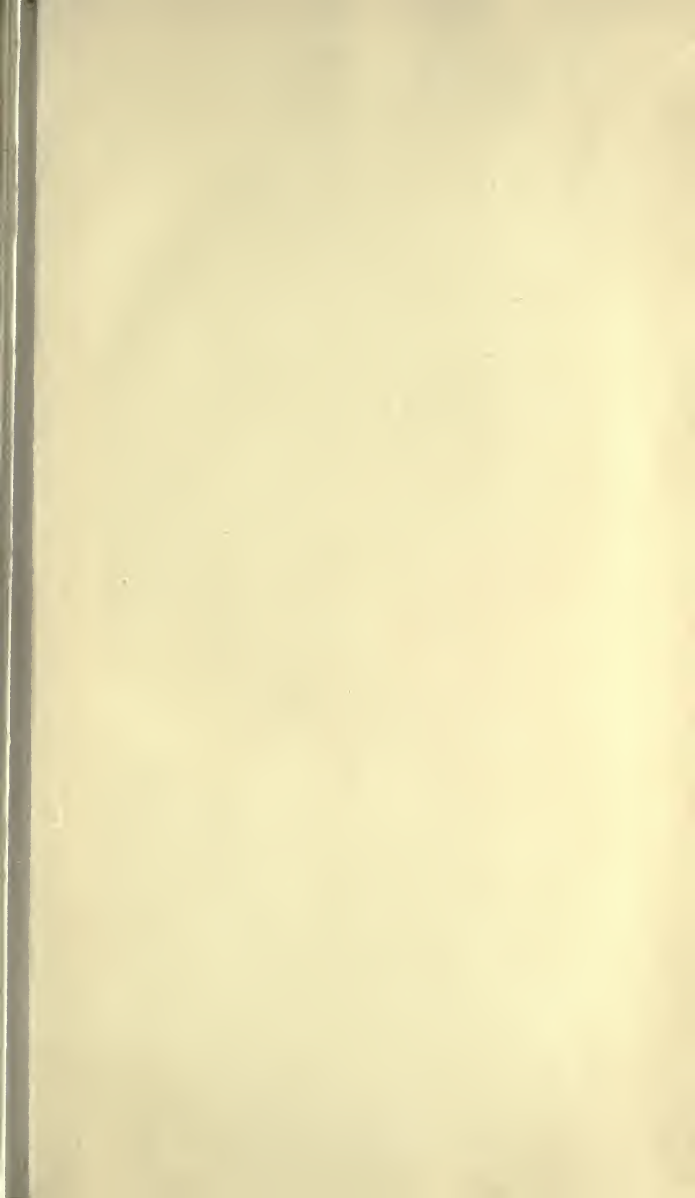
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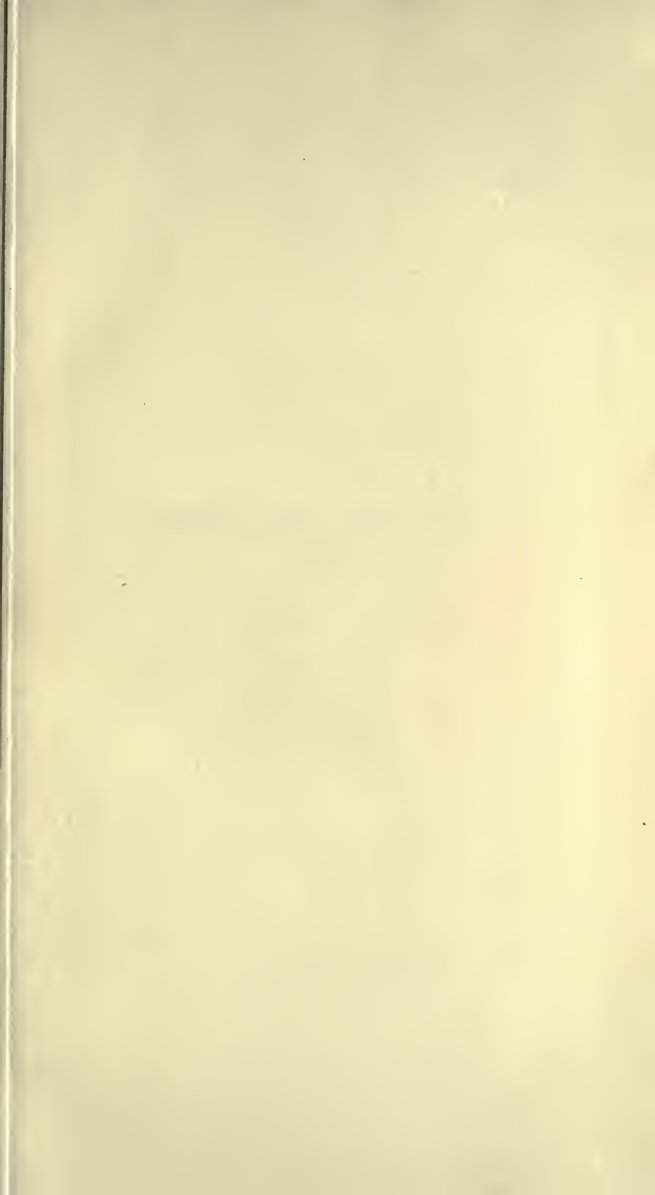
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KATHARINE ASHTON.

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KATHARINE ASHTON.

BY THE AUTHOR OF

"AMY HERBERT," "THE EXPERIENCE OF LIFE,"
"READINGS PREPARATORY TO
CONFIRMATION,"

ETC. ETC.

"Pitch thy behaviour low; thy projects high." — GEORGE HERBERT.

IN TWO VOLUMES.

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KATHARINE ASHTON.

CHAPTER XL.

It was not till Katharine found herself in the fly, driving over to Maplestead, at nearly ten o'clock at night, to intrude herself, as it were, into Colonel Forbes' household, that she fully felt what she was doing, and realised that the step she had taken might be considered a liberty. In her affection for Jane, and her intense anxiety, she had put aside every consideration but that of usefulness, and neither her mother nor Mr. Fowler had suggested any tangible objection to her plan, both taking it for granted that she, who was so intimate with Mrs. Forbes, must be equally welcome to her husband. But Katharine knew well that this was not the case. There are few things we learn more quickly than the fact of not being cordially liked. It is almost an instinct; and Katharine had seen enough of Colonel Forbes to understand the little changes in his manner to different persons. For some reason or other she was sure that neither she nor any of her relations possessed his hearty good-will, and how then would he feel when she presented herself to him, uncalled for, and forced him to be under an obligation to her? The thought made her very uneasy. It was too late to go back, or she might have been tempted to do so; she could only satisfy herself by insisting upon Mr. Fowler's going to

Colonel Forbes to sound him as to his possible objections before she saw him. If he put aside the idea of having any one but a regular nurse, or seemed annoyed at the mention of her name, Mr. Fowler was not even to say that she was there, but to allow her to go back to Rilworth in the same fly which had brought them over. The precaution seemed very unnecessary to Mr. Fowler, who had but one idea in his head, that of finding a nurse for the time being; but when Katharine said it must be, he had no reason to object, and the matter being thus settled, both threw themselves back in the carriage, and relapsed into silence during the remainder of their short drive to Maplestead.

"The Colonel will think I have gone off comfortably to-bed, and forgotten him;" said Mr. Fowler, taking out his watch, as they stopped at the lodge-gate, and making the old woman who opened it hold up her lamp, that he might see the time. "A quarter-past ten, I declare. Any news from the house, granny?" he added, addressing the woman.—"None that I've heard of, sir, except that the great London doctor be come."—"Pshaw! drive on;" and Mr. Fowler put his head out of the window to look at the lights in the house. It struck Katharine forcibly that he was very anxious, much more anxious than he had said, yet she could not make up her mind to ask him; and he might not have acknowledged it if she had; medical men are always very cautious. He jumped out of the fly as soon as it stopped, and seemed as if he could scarcely wait with ordinary patience till the door was opened. "Has your mistress had any sleep?" was his first question to the footman. "Yes, sir, for more than an hour."—"Good." He went back to Katharine: "You had better come in at once, it will be much the shortest way."—"No, indeed; I

assure you I know best; and remember you don't say a word of my being here till you have sounded the matter." It was not the moment to dispute the point, and Mr. Fowler went in. "Won't you get out, ma'am?" said the footman, coming up to the carriage, and supposing that Katharine was the nurse.—"No, thank you, I will wait here for Mr. Fowler. Please shut the door." The man obeyed, thinking it rather odd; and Katharine sat back in the carriage to avoid observation, and listened for sounds in the house—the shutting of doors, the murmur of voices, and especially the return of Mr. Fowler's footsteps. She tried to be patient and to think that it was quite natural he should stay so long, but she could not help feeling uneasy. She had not seriously contemplated the possibility of being obliged to go back, it was only a kind of necessary precaution which made her send Mr. Fowler before her; but now she began to trouble herself with all kinds of fancies, especially the fear that Colonel Forbes would be so seriously annoyed as to put a stop to her seeing any more of Jane for the future. She was inclined to be unreasonable, as anxious people generally are; but she was put out of her suspense at last. Mr. Fowler came back alone. Katharine caught a glimpse of his face by the lamp in the hall; and saw he looked much discomposed. "There, come in," he muttered, in an angry tone, letting down the steps of the fly himself. "See if I put myself out of my way for any one again in a hurry. The Colonel shall hire a nurse himself next time."—"But does he not like my coming? Are you quite sure I ought?" said Katharine, drawing back. Mr. Fowler made no reply, except by holding out his hand to help her out of the carriage. Two footmen were in the hall, who stared at her rather unceremoniously, and did not seem to know at all what they were to do with her. Katharine

rine sat down, whilst Mr. Fowler went up to one of the men, and began talking to him in an under voice. She grew more and more annoyed. Colonel Forbes ought certainly, she felt, to have had the civility to come and speak to her. If it had not been for Jane she would have been tempted to return even then, but the thought of her overpowered everything; "Perhaps you will come this way into the housekeeper's room," said one of the servants, speaking civilly, and opening a door for her to pass. Katharine looked entreatingly at Mr. Fowler—she wanted very much to be told what Colonel Forbes had said;—but Mr. Fowler was buttoning up his great-coat, preparatory, as it seemed, to his return to Rilworth. Katharine went back to him, and asked him what she was to do. "What you are told, I suppose," was his reply; "you need not ask me, you are under Dr. Lowe now."—"But won't you stay, won't you introduce me to Dr. Lowe, and just tell him who I am?" said Katharine.—"Not I, trust me; if he takes it all upon himself, he shall have it his own way, I can tell him. Good night. I suppose we shall see you back at Rilworth some time to-morrow?" He hurried from her before she had time to ask another question, and the fly drove off.

Katharine stood for a moment irresolute and confused; but the footman was still holding the door open for her, and there was nothing to be done but to follow where he led the way—to the housekeeper's room. It was empty, but a cheerful, bright fire was blazing in it. "The housekeeper is ill, I am sorry to hear," observed Katharine, thinking it necessary to make some remark to her attendant.—"Yes, Miss, she has kept her bed these three days with a bad cold on the chest." He was going away as Katharine sat down by the fire; but she detained him with another question: "Is Dr. Lowe at

liberty? I should very much like to see him.”—“I can’t say, miss. I will inquire.” And Katharine was left alone.

It was a feeling of despair at her uncomfortable position which had made her ask for Dr. Lowe. She was not at all certain what it would be right to say to him when he came. How differently she was treated now to what she would have been if Jane could have had any idea that she was there! Katharine was obliged to remember this, to remind herself that there was no lady at the head of affairs just then, and that men were often awkward and seemingly forgetful without meaning to be so, in order to be in any way patient. She made up her mind at last to be brave—not to care what was said or done to her, but to think only of what she could say and do for other people; and, as a preliminary step, not to be shy with Dr. Lowe, but tell him why she was come, and ask him to make her useful.—A heavy tread along the passage, rather firm and stately too—Katharine hoped that Dr. Lowe would not behave in a cold or abrupt manner, and frighten her, or she should not be able to explain her meaning. Her heart beat quite fast when the door opened; it stopped for a second from a feeling which was nearly akin to fear, when she saw Colonel Forbes.

His face was grave, but not anxious, at least so Katharine interpreted its expression; and he came up to her and shook hands, and said she had taken a great deal of trouble so late at night; but there was an indescribable most painful coldness of manner, which froze every idea that Katharine might previously have possessed. “Mrs. Forbes will be much obliged, I am sure,” he added, as if he were making a great effort to be civil. “We hope to-morrow to have a regular nurse; and to-night

we could have managed. I really regret that you should have troubled yourself.”—“I was told that the housekeeper was ill,” said Katharine, in an apologetic tone, “and Mr. Fowler thought the lady’s maid inexperienced.”—An under smile of satire, and perhaps annoyance, played round Colonel Forbes’ mouth: “Mr. Fowler is very good; he makes himself a little too anxious, as country doctors very often do. They have not so much practice as London physicians, and of course do not understand symptoms in the same way. Dr. Lowe assures me that the attack will soon go off, and all we shall require will be care.”—“Then perhaps I can be of no use,” said Katharine, a little proudly.—“Oh! no, indeed, I could not on any account take upon myself to say that. No doubt, as you are so kindly anxious, Dr. Lowe will find some work for you; unless, which perhaps I should recommend after your drive, you may think it better to have some tea and go to-bed. I will give the servants orders to wait upon you. You will excuse my remaining any longer myself. I must go and see whether I am wanted. Good night!” And he shook hands again. Poor Katharine! how heartily she wished herself back again in her own home; and what an earnest resolution she made never again to obtrude her services where she was not perfectly certain they were needed!

But Colonel Forbes was no sooner gone than another visitor appeared in the housekeeper’s room, and the current of Katharine’s ideas was completely changed. A hasty, determined knock at the door was immediately followed by the entrance of Dr. Lowe, a quick-eyed, quick-mannered, yet cordial and kind-hearted individual, who seemed to understand Katharine and all her concerns by intuition; and assured her twice in one breath that he was

very glad she was come, very glad indeed—the case required great care. His good friend Colonel Forbes had been perhaps a little too much alarmed; a little—but there must be a great deal of watchfulness still. “And I may sit up to-night then?” said Katharine, much relieved. — “To-night, and to-morrow night, and as many nights as you please, only don’t knock yourself up. There will be work enough for a good while to come,” he added, speaking more to himself. “Now, are you ready?” And before Katharine had time to answer, he led the way upstairs. Katharine expected to find Colonel Forbes in his wife’s room; but Jane’s only attendant was one of the housemaids. There were signs, however, of Colonel Forbes’ having been there; for an open book and a paper-knife were lying in the great arm-chair, and it was to be supposed therefore that he meant to return. Katharine, however, did not think about that; she had neither eye nor thought for anything but Jane’s pale, suffering face, of which she caught a glimpse as she entered the room. Dr. Lowe motioned to her to keep at a distance, and then he went up to the bed, and said, “We have brought you an old friend, Mrs. Forbes, I hope you will be glad to see her.” Jane looked up at him with an expression of face which showed that she only half-comprehended his meaning; but when he added “Miss Ashton,” a gleam of pleasure lightened up her face, and her eye glanced rapidly round the room. Katharine sat down by her, and took off her bonnet, and said she was going to stay; and Jane seemed satisfied then, and sank back into the same almost torpid state. Yet she was still conscious who was near, for when Katharine moved again, wishing to go into the next room, and receive her instructions for the night from Dr. Lowe, Jane was disturbed, and

put out her hand to stop her, and was only quieted by the assurance, twice given, that she would return immediately. The directions were very simple, merely to give medicine at certain hours, and to call Dr. Lowe if the pain returned. There was no fear, it seemed, of anything like immediate danger, though there was a necessity for great care. Dr. Lowe gave all necessary instructions in his own peculiar department; the housemaid gave all requisite information in every other; Katharine was provided with wine and biscuits in case of needing them herself, and then both the physician and the servant wished her good night, and left her.

No one said anything about Colonel Forbes — no one suggested whether he would or would not return. His ways were evidently a mystery not to be inquired into.

Katharine took possession of the seat opposite to the empty arm-chair, which she did not like to occupy, though it had rather a ghastly look, it was so like Colonel Forbes himself; and if she had not been expecting him to enter, she would probably have fallen into a reverie. There was some excitement in the novelty of her position, and she was not as anxious as she had thought she should be. Dr. Lowe's manner had inspired her with hope and confidence. She did not think that anything startling or terrible was going to happen then, and yet she did feel as if in some way she had turned over a new and important page of the volume of her earthly life. Her thoughts wandered back to her first acquaintance with Jane,—the first time that she had ever heard of her. That had been at Miss Richardson's, when a rumour reached the school that a new young lady was coming amongst them. Katharine could remember Jane's introduction:

the shy, timid glance—the words spoken so low they could scarcely be heard—the frightened look of appeal to Miss Richardson's protection, when one or two of the elder girls made careless personal observations about her. How little she could have imagined then that the most powerful influence to be exercised over her in life was to proceed from one so shrinking and humble! Yet so it was; Jane's earnestness had awakened Katharine's, and the effects of that awakening were to be felt in life, in death, and beyond death in eternity!

And yet in the eyes of the world there were such barriers between them! That was the greatest wonder of all. Katharine looked at the luxurious chamber in which Jane was lying, and it brought back in strong contrast the absence of riches and refinements in her own home; and she thought of the polished society in which Jane moved, and felt herself admitted more by sufferance than courtesy into the privacy of her family, since Colonel Forbes looked down upon her, and his friends would, for the most part, have thought it beneath them to notice her; and yet she could not but feel that Jane and herself were in heart one. They had been so in childhood, they were so still; how was it?

She took up Jane's Bible, which was lying on the table. It happened to open at St. Paul's epistle to Philemon, and she read it through; not with any particular intention, but because it had first presented itself; yet it had a special meaning to her at that time. Onesimus, she had been told, was a runaway slave, St. Paul was a gentleman by birth and education; yet was Onesimus to be received "not now as a servant, but above a servant, a brother beloved;" a brother, because born to the same inheritance, and working, though still a servant in the eyes of man, for the same glorious cause.

If such was Christianity in its early times, such also must Christianity be still. But the lesson then principally inculcated by fellowship in suffering must, in a different state of society, be taught by fellowship in work. When Jane Sinclair and Katharine Ashton joined in the same work, they were unconsciously, yet most firmly, cementing the tie which the habits of the world would otherwise, in all probability, have utterly severed. Katharine was willing to work still, either with Jane or for her; they had mutual interests, and it mattered little what form the service assumed, only that it was happiness to her to feel that she could be a comfort to one whom she so truly loved. It was this feeling which gave her self-respect and self-command. Outward deference to those above her in society was accorded by her freely; for, although belonging to things of this world, it was an obligation rendered sacred by the ordering of God's Providence, but it could never cause any sense of humiliation. How could a difference of worldly rank touch one whose aim was a crown in Heaven?

Not that Katharine could enjoy this feeling of ease at all times. Worldly people above her in rank often made her uncomfortable. She did not know by what standard they would judge her, and she was afraid, therefore, of jarring upon them, or shocking their prejudices. Whatever she said or did, when with Jane, would she knew be thoroughly understood; but it was not so with Colonel Forbes. It was this doubt which was the great drawback to the satisfaction she might otherwise have felt in being now permitted to be of use to Jane in her illness. Colonel Forbes might, probably he did, think it an intrusion; his manner had certainly been as cold as if she had really taken a great liberty. Katharine could not feel at all happy in her mind

when she thought he would return to occupy the great arm-chair; but the minutes wore away, and still he did not appear; and then a new fear took possession of her; that he was annoyed at her being there, and therefore was absent on purpose. This was worse even than the other; and she now expected him as anxiously as before she had dreaded his coming.

Jane was lying very quiet all this time, as Dr. Lowe had said she probably would do, from the effect of opiates; and Katharine, hoping that she might be really sleeping, scarcely dared to move for fear of rousing her. But a sudden opening of the door did what she had been so much striving to prevent. Jane started up and asked in a frightened voice who was there. — Katharine was at her bedside in a moment. “Only Colonel Forbes; he did not know you were asleep.” — “Oh!” Jane did not smile, and her head fell back on her pillow. Colonel Forbes went to the fireplace and made a sign to Katharine that he wished to speak with her. He looked disconcerted with himself, and inquired in a whisper if Mrs. Forbes had been asleep long. “Some time, I hope, sir,” replied Katharine; “but I can’t quite say. She has not moved till just this minute.” She did not mean to reproach him for want of thought; but it seemed that he so understood her words, for he said petulantly, “That noisy door ought to be oiled. I must speak about it to-morrow. You say she has had a quiet sleep.” — “She has been lying quiet, sir; I don’t know whether she has been asleep.” — “Please don’t whisper,” said Jane, raising her faint voice as loudly as she could. Colonel Forbes turned abruptly away from Katharine and went up to his wife: “My dear, it is impossible not to whisper in a sick room. Let me see how you are, let me feel your pulse.” He laid his

fingers on her wrist, took out his watch, and, moving the night-lamp, without seeing that the light came full upon Jane's face, counted the pulsations most carefully. "A weak pulse, not so quick though, by a good deal. Dr. Lowe says we shall have you better by ten degrees after a night's rest."—"I hope so," said Jane, perhaps a little despondingly.—"You must keep up your spirits, my love; it does not do to look on the dark side of things. Miss Ashton will tell you that." Katharine, pleased at hearing her name mentioned, thought she might draw nearer, and she came rather more within view of Jane. "It is very kind of Katharine, isn't it?" said Jane, trying to move, so that she might see her.—"Very kind indeed, my love. Pray keep still, nothing can be worse for you than moving about. As Miss Ashton is here I don't think I shall sit up, she will be a better nurse than I could be. There is nothing more that I can do for you, is there?"—"Nothing, thank you, dear Philip,—only kiss me." He bent down and kissed her, and Jane kept his hand still in her feeble grasp, and Katharine half heard the words: "You are not angry with me now, Philip?" and being certain that they were not intended for her, moved away. Colonel Forbes' reply was very short. Katharine thought she heard a sigh afterwards. He came up to the fireplace once more, and took up the book and the paper-knife which were lying in the arm-chair. "You have everything you require, I hope, Miss Ashton? I shall be in the next room if I am wanted. Good night." A polite bow was answered by a curtsy from Katharine. She could scarcely avoid smiling at the hesitation he had about shaking hands with her.

"Don't you think you shall go to sleep again, dear Mrs. Forbes?" said Katharine, as she drew

the curtain, so as again to shade Jane's face from the night-lamp. Jane moved her hand as a sign that Katharine was to come and sit down by her. She did not look at all sleepy, though her eyes were dim, as if tears had lately gathered in them. "It is so kind! Katharine," she said; "and would you come again if I were very ill?"—"Yes, of course, in a moment; at any moment; you might always depend upon me."—"I don't think I am very ill to-night," continued Jane. "I was last night—I may be again." She paused, as if trying to collect her strength for the next words, and then added, "Katharine, if I am not very careful I shall have a heart complaint." She fixed her eyes upon Katharine's anxious face, but there was no change in it, and Katharine only said, "Then we must take the greatest care of you—every one will, you may be sure."—"Philip does not know it," continued Jane in a lighter tone. Dr. Lowe will tell him before he goes, and I may live many years, and I may not die from that; only——" "One cannot forget such a possibility," said Katharine. Her voice had a choking sound, which Jane noticed. "It is not meant we should forget it," she said, taking Katharine's hand fondly; "not that it really makes any difference, we are all under sentence of death; but I suppose one can't help feeling differently when there is a certain danger. Yet it is not my greatest danger, Katharine," she continued; "I made Dr. Lowe tell me all, for I have long had suspicions. He says I may live to old age if nothing should aggravate the evil at present existing; but I have been out of health generally for a long time, and what would be slight illnesses for others will be great ones for me. It has been so now."—"Colonel Forbes will be so careful of you when he knows the truth," said Katharine, uttering, however, more

her wishes than her convictions, "that you will be in less danger, humanly speaking, than you have been."—"Yes." A doubtful "yes," followed by a pause. "But, Katharine, if I were very ill at any time, would you really come to me?" Her voice was pleading in its earnestness, and Katharine replied instantly and eagerly, "From the world's end I would come, if I might." As the words were spoken she felt that the promise was solemn beyond her first thoughts; but Jane's placid grateful "thank you," repaid her, and she had no fear for its performance. "And now you will go to sleep again," said Katharine gently. — "Yes, I will try; please sit by me still. How cool you are!" and Jane laid her burning fingers upon Katharine's hand, and repeated again, "You have promised to come to me?" And then the strength which she had exerted in talking seemed nearly exhausted, and the old feeling of torpor crept over her, and closing her eyes, she appeared about to fall asleep. Katharine sat in the same position for at least two hours, not venturing to remove her hand from Jane's lest she might disturb her. After that Jane woke up for a little while, and Katharine gave her her medicine and read some of the Psalms to her; but they did not talk again. And so the weary hours of darkness passed, and the chilling morning light stole in through the chinks of the closed shutters, and by that time Katharine was so exceedingly tired that she could not think of anything but the comfort of rest, and the difficulty she should find in getting through the business of the coming day, and for a few moments she fell asleep herself. She was roused, however, about five o'clock by Jane's restlessness. The pain in her side had returned again, not as violently as at first, but sufficiently so to be alarming to Katharine. Jane

herself too was a little frightened, and begged that the bell might be rung for some one to come and help her ; but just as Katharine was going to pull the handle, she stopped her and said, "No, you must not, you will disturb Philip." — "He would rather be disturbed if you are suffering," said Katharine. — "No, no ; it must not be ;" and Jane's face, even in the midst of her bodily suffering, showed that the pain of her mind was greater. — "But he ought to know, and I am afraid he will be vexed with me if I don't call him," said Katharine. Jane could scarcely speak, the pain was so intense ; but she grasped Katharine's arm convulsively, and whispered in an agony of eagerness, "Please not, — Dr. Lowe." Katharine was in great perplexity, for she did not think that Jane, in her present state, ought to be left for a single moment ; but there was no alternative, and, hurrying along the passage, she knocked at the door of the apartment which she had been told Dr. Lowe occupied. — His quiet manner reassured her, as it had done before. The return of the pain, he said, was only what was to be expected — there was no reason to call any one — certainly not Colonel Forbes. If Katharine would only attend to his directions nothing else was required ; and when Dr. Lowe had given them, and visited Jane for a few minutes, he went back to his bed and Katharine returned to her watch.

Jane talked a little again, as the pain decreased, but it was chiefly upon indifferent subjects. She did not again allude to her illness, and she seemed to have a dread, which to Katharine was unaccountable, of any reference to the removal to Moorlands. It was impossible not to touch upon it every now and then ; but Jane always turned from it, and sometimes so awkwardly as to be abrupt. She liked to hear anything which Katharine could

tell her of the poor people, but the questions she asked the most eagerly were about the Miss Ronaldsons and their nephew; and a look of blank disappointment came over her when she heard Katharine say, in an indifferent tone, that Mr. Ronaldson was gone back to the north, and would probably not be at Rilworth again for a very long time. Katharine did feel particularly indifferent just then, for Jane's illness had put all thought of herself and her own cares out of her mind. Jane was silent for several minutes after receiving the information, and Katharine, supposing she was tired, moved away from the bed, and busied herself with putting the room in order. It was growing so late that she thought it must be nearly time to give up her place of watcher to another, and return herself to Rilworth. Jane looked at her affectionately, when, after a time, she stood again by the bedside; and, noticing her weary face, became anxious that she should have her breakfast and then take some rest. Her own maid could come to her now, she said, and that would be all she should want. Katharine begged to remain a little longer, till she had seen Colonel Forbes; after that she must return home.—“Without rest! Oh, no, Katharine; you will be quite ill. Besides, Colonel Forbes may be late.”—“But he will come to see you the first thing, I suppose?” said Katharine.—“Perhaps so,” was Jane's short reply; and then, apparently fearing that Katharine might think hardly of him, she added, “You know he has so very much to do, he can't command his own time.” It was most strange to Katharine. She imagined that a husband's natural impulse would have been to make his wife the object of his earliest attention. She was quite sure that if it had been the case of her father and mother it would have been so, and the

little trait gave a more painful impression of the feeling existing between Colonel Forbes and Jane than anything she had observed before. "I should not like to go without seeing him," continued Katharine; "I want to thank him for letting me stay, and I should be glad to know, too, if I could be of any further use."—"And you won't come back?" said Jane musingly.—"I am afraid I shall not be able," was Katharine's reply. "My mother wants me at home so much, and you know I must make my duty to her the first object."—"Yes, certainly, yes," continued Jane in the same musing tone. "She would miss you exceedingly if you were to go away from her."—"If I were to go; but there is no chance of that."—Jane's lips framed a sentence, which she yet seemed unwilling to utter; but after a long pause, in which she appeared to have been deeply engaged in her own thoughts, she said, "I exacted a selfish promise last night; you might not be able to keep it."—"I might be ill," said Katharine; "I know nothing else which should prevent me."—"You might be married," said Jane; and she coloured far more than Katharine.—"I might be; it is not probable; but, dear Mrs. Forbes, I could not marry any one who would not spare me for such a purpose."—"So you think," said Jane; "but you cannot be sure. How can people know each other before they marry?"—"I could not marry upon a short acquaintance," said Katharine.—"And how will the longest acquaintance help you?" asked Jane. "At least," she added quickly, "if it is knowledge after you are engaged."—"I hope mine would not be that kind of knowledge," observed Katharine; "I quite agree there is but little trust to be placed in it. People deceive themselves, partly from vanity, and partly because they are happy, and so they end in deceiving each other;

I have seen that." Jane turned away her head and sighed. "But we must not trouble about these far-off improbabilities," said Katharine, more lightly; "there is enough to think of for the present. I would come back to-day if I might, and if I were able, but I must not let my mother be fretted, and perhaps you will have other nurses and better ones. Mr. Fowler said last night that perhaps one of the Miss Forbes would come to you."—"They would if Philip liked it," said Jane; and then she thought a minute, and observed, "They don't come here very often."—"But if they knew you were ill they would come," said Katharine.—"Yes, they are very good; I think they would help me as much as they could, but they have a good deal to do at home."—"I would much rather nurse you entirely myself," said Katharine affectionately; "but Colonel Forbes would not like that. At least," and she blushed a little, "I fancied last night that he did not much approve of having a stranger about."—"He did not say anything, did he?" asked Jane hurriedly.—"Oh! no; he was very kind; and it might have been only my notion, but I should like to be quite sure he would not disapprove before I offered myself again. However, that is foolish talking," she continued. "Dear Mrs. Forbes, I must really think of going now. If I were to ring would your maid come to you?"—Jane considered again, and having settled that it was now so late there would be no fear of disturbing "Philip," suffered Katharine to ring. They were waiting in silence, and Katharine was thinking in her own mind that Jane looked more ill by daylight than she had done by candle-light, when a little impatient knock was heard at the door. "That is Philip," said Jane instantly. Katharine went to the door.—Colonel Forbes was in his

dressing-gown; a most unfortunate circumstance for his temper, since he was scrupulously particular as to his personal appearance. He drew back directly he saw Katharine. "Miss Ashton! I beg your pardon; I thought you were gone to take some rest."—"I am going home, I believe, sir," said Katharine, holding open the door for him to enter.—He hesitated a moment, and then walked straight up to the bed with a step which showed that he was uncomfortably conscious of wearing slippers. "How are you, my love? I heard your bell, or I should not have come in. What sort of night have you had?"—"Very tolerable," said Jane, cheerfully; "I slept nearly two hours, didn't I, Katharine?"—"Quite two hours," replied Katharine, "and then the pain came on."—"Yes, yes," repeated Colonel Forbes hastily; "yes, we must be prepared for that. It won't do to distress yourself, my dear, because the pain returns. Dr. Lowe told me yesterday it was quite to be expected. It was not as bad, I suppose, as at first."—"Not quite," said Jane, wishing to speak the truth, and yet anxious to say what she knew he would wish to hear. He had a particular dislike to be told of any person being in pain.—"And we shall get you up, I hope, by-and-by," he continued. "Oh! no," exclaimed Katharine, entirely forgetting to whom she was speaking, but recollecting it directly afterwards, and becoming extremely confused.—Colonel Forbes just looked at her, and then repeated, "We shall get you up by-and-by, my love; it will be better for you;—lying in bed is extremely weakening."—"I dare say Dr. Lowe will leave full directions," said Jane; "I suppose he will go back to-day."—"Yes, there can be no reason for his staying now that you are so much better. Fowler will be able to manage for you, only we must not

let him croak as he does." Jane did not answer, but leant her head back, and her face changed, so that Katharine saw she was not by any means free from pain. Colonel Forbes, however, did not perceive it, and aware that he had been uncourteous to Katharine, he turned to her and said a few civil words about the obligation they were under for the exertion she had made, taking care, however, to add that he hoped it would not be required of any one again. Mrs. Forbes being so much better already, it was to be expected she would improve rapidly. Katharine could not even venture to say that she hoped he would call upon her for her services another time if necessary. She was sure that he would not do so if he could possibly avoid it, and her only reply was a request that, if it were not very inconvenient, she might be allowed to go back to Rilworth in the cart, as she felt herself rather too tired for the walk. "Oh! certainly." Nothing could be more hearty than Colonel Forbes' acquiescence; his face quite brightened at the idea, and he assured her that he would give orders for it directly. All he begged was, that she would take some breakfast first; she would find some ready for her in the housekeeper's room. Katharine was as grateful as it was necessary to be—that is, she returned him precisely the civility he gave; and Colonel Forbes, kissing Jane's forehead, and telling her to keep up her spirits, and eat and drink as much as she could, retired, under the protection of the curtain, with as little of the undignified shuffle of slippers as possible.

When he was gone Katharine prepared to go too; but more unwillingly than she would have done before. In some way or other Colonel Forbes always contrived to leave on Jane's mind traces of his visits—not "angels' visits," though "few and

far between." Katharine could not exactly tell the reason why, but she could guess something, and feel a great deal more. Persons who present the repelling pole of the moral magnet always do make their presence felt, even to bystanders. Jane now was not at all like what she had been a few minutes before. It seemed as if her husband possessed the power of shutting up her feelings, or at least their expression, even towards others. She said nothing of Katharine's coming back, and did not even express a wish to see her again, till just as Katharine was upon the very point of leaving her, and was putting her pillow comfortable, and smoothing the coverlet, and reminding the maid, who was present, of all the minute directions which Dr. Lowe had given. Then Jane seized one of Katharine's hands in both hers, and with all her little strength forcing her to bend down to her, said, "When I am very ill, you have promised." "Yes, I have promised, and, with God's help, I will keep the promise;" and Katharine departed.

Katharine's breakfast in the housekeeper's room was very comfortable, for Colonel Forbes' order had been strict that every attention should be paid her. He would have done the same if she had been actually a deadly enemy; it was part of his pride that no one in his house should be neglected. So Katharine sat down by a bright fire, and was served with coffee, and Westphalia ham, and hot rolls, which she was too tired and feverish to like, but which she ate, because it was necessary to keep up her strength for the day's work. From time to time the handle of the door was turned noiselessly, and a solemn man-servant appeared, to inquire if she had everything she wanted, and, putting fresh coals on the fire, withdrew, equally solemnly. Quietness was the characteristic of the house. Stealthy steps

moved along the passage, and brooms and dustpans did their duty with faint sounds in the distance, and the great clock in the servant's hall ticked sepulchrally, as if afflicted with a cold in the chest. So soothing it all was, that Katharine's almost irresistible impulse was to fall back in her chair, and make up the arrears of sleep; but there was business awaiting her, the packing to be begun, and the charwoman to be directed, so she set herself to resist the temptation, and even walked up and down the room at intervals, to prevent herself from yielding to it, trying to settle in her own mind what she would do first when she reached home.

But home seemed far off just at that moment; her thoughts would wander back continually to Jane's room, and what she had said, and the promise which had been given. The web of human existence is strangely intermingled. Katharine's life had, in some way, been blended with Jane's for several years, and now it seemed as if circumstances might unite them yet more closely. It was not Katharine's reason which told her this, but her affection and sympathy. She had such a strong sense of Jane's loneliness, in spite of the presence of husband, children, and friends; and the words "When I am very ill you will come to me" rang touchingly and mournfully in her ears, and seemed to constitute her in a manner Jane's special guardian and watchful friend. Yet Katharine did not think that "very ill" was likely to come soon. She would not allow herself to think that when Colonel Forbes knew the state of his wife's health he would ever again expose her to the risk of over-exertion, and so she comforted herself for the moment; and feeling at last that interest for Jane was superseding the more imperative demands of her home duties, resolved, by a vigorous effort, to put aside all lingering remem-

branches of the past or guesses about the future, and think only of the present ; a resolution much assisted by the announcement of the solemn footman, that the cart was ready.

CHAPTER XLI.

KATHARINE found a tolerably comfortable state of affairs on her return home. Betsy Carter, who always appeared to particular advantage when left to be useful in her own way, had managed to be a tolerable substitute for Katharine ; and Mrs. Ashton had eaten a good breakfast, and was just preparing to make an onset on the business of the day at half a dozen different points when her daughter made her appearance.

“What ! so early, Kitty, my dear ; I didn’t expect you for the next hour at least. It is good of you, I must say. Sit down and tell us all about it, and have some breakfast. Betsy will get you some, won’t you, Betsy ?” Miss Carter was quite pleased to be recognised in her responsible position as the manager of the establishment, and would instantly have ordered a sumptuous repast but for Katharine’s hearty “No, thank you ; please not, Betsy. Mother, dear, I have had my breakfast, and I couldn’t possibly eat anything more ; but just tell me how you are, and how you have been getting on.”—“Well, pretty fair, for the matter of that ; Betsy has been very kind. We were not quite so early as usual, for we had rather a bad night at first, in the sleeping way, not being so well used to each other ; so we made up for it this morning, and Betsy has been as busy as a bee, and has set Susan and Mrs. Crossin.

to work, packing up the house-linen. But I am glad you are come, Kitty; we don't do half as well without you; and you have not told us yet about Mrs. Forbes, though I knew by your face when you came in that she couldn't be worse."—"She is better a good deal, I hope," replied Katharine; "but I am very glad I went. I think I was of use; and she liked to have me."—"Well! that was good. I hope she understood that I wouldn't have spared you for every one; and the Colonel was civil, was he?"—"Yes," said Katharine; "he could not very well be uncivil." Betsy Carter laughed to herself, but said nothing. "And they gave you everything you wanted, I suppose?" said Mrs. Ashton; "a good fire, and plenty to eat and drink?"—"Of course," interrupted Miss Carter; "it's not the Maplestead fashion to let any one starve. You should hear the stories I hear sometimes from the housekeeper, about the way things go on in the kitchen."—"Well! it's all right that it should be so in a large house," observed Mrs. Ashton; "but what is the matter with Mrs. Forbes, Kitty?"—"I don't quite know what they call it, mother; and it does not so much signify as she is better." Katharine had an instinctive dislike to hearing Maplestead discussed by persons who did not understand Jane, and especially she dreaded Betsy Carter's gossip; so, after warming herself for a few minutes, and answering her mother's anxious questions as to how she felt, and assuring her that she was not ill from fatigue, she said she would go upstairs and take off her things, and see what Susan and Mrs. Crossin were about.

Home looked homely to Katharine; but it was very comfortable and free, and it was a sad thought that it must soon be given up. She had no fear of being misunderstood by her mother; but she could not be equally sure with Selina, and it would be a

trial to be living in another person's house, even though he were her own brother, after she had so long been accustomed to consider herself joint-mistress with her mother. And everything now was reminding her that change was at hand;—the closets in her own room were empty, and the floor was strewn with the various articles which had once occupied their shelves. This was a fancy of Miss Carter's; she liked, she said, to see what there was put away, and then it was easy to judge what was to be done with it; and for the last hour Susan and Mrs. Crossin had been busy unloading shelves in the different closets, till the whole of the upper chamber, except Mrs. Ashton's bed-room, looked like a great lumber-room. Katharine wished very much that the work had been delayed till her return, and thought that it would be much easier to manage with only her mother to help her, and without the risk of Betsy Carter's suggestions. But Betsy liked a bustle, and was fully convinced in her own mind that neither Mrs. Ashton nor Katharine knew half as well as she did "what ought to be done with what;" so she at once announced her intention of staying to help them, and Katharine had no alternative but resignation, and as much gratitude as she could summon up for the occasion.

And very busily they worked; Katharine trying to forget that she was dreadfully tired, and had sat up all night, and sometimes actually succeeding to a certain extent. After dinner, however, she looked so entirely fagged, that Mrs. Ashton insisted upon her lying down for an hour, and Katharine accordingly retired to her now comfortless apartment to rest, and, if possible, sleep, in spite of the knocking of hammers, the moving of tables and boxes, and the orders given in Miss Carter's loudest tones. She slept for two hours, and was awakened by voices in

the parlour below. John's voice was one; Henry Madden's another. It was necessary, therefore, to go down and talk over business;—the amount of yearly income to be received from the shop had never been settled yet, though it had been talked about in general terms. Katharine felt that neither her mother nor her brother had good heads for business, and she did not place very much confidence in her own, and a sigh escaped her as she thought of the way in which hitherto they had been saved from all trouble of the kind, followed by a longing, checked as soon as it arose, that Charles Ronaldson would settle near them to help them in their difficulties.

Betsy Carter was to go home to drink tea, so that Katharine knew they should have the evening to themselves. She dreaded it rather; business matters were always likely to bring thoughtless words and misunderstandings, and John's temper was hasty, and Henry Madden was inclined to be self-willed and imperious. There was no one to put them down or direct them in any way. Mrs. Ashton never contradicted John, and Katharine herself had no authority. Again came the sorrowful longing for her father, and again Katharine felt herself discontented and distrustful, till she remembered the fowls of the air fed without thought for themselves, and the hairs of her head which were all numbered; and a better, a dearer Love brought back the quiet confidence which was now habitual to her.

Business began at once, for John was in a hurry, and indeed never could bear delays of any kind. His character showed itself painfully to Katharine as the conversation proceeded. His calculations were continually made upon the supposition that probabilities were certainties, and this, of course, greatly misled him. Henry Madden, on the con-

trary, would reckon upon nothing which was not actually in his possession at the present, or at least assured to him by constant experience of the past. It was very difficult to make two such minds meet, and, as the evening wore on, Katharine became almost hopeless. She felt also that she distrusted Henry Madden in his way quite as much as she did her brother. He was a selfish person; and where his interest was concerned it was almost impossible to make him see things fairly. Then again he was a politician, and not a very reasonable or judicious one; and this to Katharine was one of the most objectionable points about him. It might do him so much harm in his business, and if it did, and they were dependent upon him, they must, of course, suffer. Again she pondered the desirableness of parting with everything at once; and again she was met by the thought of John's extravagance, and her mother's weak fondness, which would infallibly cause all that they possessed to be made over to him if it were possible to grasp it. She sat by, for the most part, silent, or, if she did speak, it was generally to put in some conciliatory word, or to soften anything which might be said that was likely to be painful to her mother's feelings. And there was a great deal of this kind; perhaps it was impossible to help it, but it did seem strange to Katharine to hear Henry Madden speaking of her father, criticising what he had done, and referring to what he had said, without any apparent remembrance of her mother's presence; and several times in the course of the evening Katharine drew near to her mother, under pretence of arranging her work, and fondly pressed her hand, and kissed her, because she saw the tears stealing down Mrs. Ashton's cheeks, in consequence of some thought-

less speech which Mr. Madden had no idea could give pain, and which John did not notice.

There was an end to that trial, however, as there is to everything earthly ;—a truism which, obvious though it is, we are all in our impatience liable to forget. By ten o'clock the business had advanced as far as the conviction on both sides that agreement was impossible, and that a third person must be called in ; and with this satisfactory announcement the party separated. Poor Katharine ! how worn and heart-sick she felt when she went to bed ! and how wrong it seemed to be absorbed, as she felt herself, in matters which after all were only of this world ! Whether she and her mother were to have twenty or thirty pounds a year more or less was not of such vast importance, for at all events they would have enough to live upon comfortably ; yet she was as eager about it, and as much annoyed in her heart, as John, when Mr. Madden disputed the point.

Katharine did not understand her own character. A love of justice was a very prominent trait. She could give away hundreds, but she could not bear to be unjustly deprived of a penny—and this led her sometimes to be hard in her judgment, and severe in her censures. She saw the effect of her natural disposition, but she did not know the cause ; happily for her, indeed, for it saved her from the temptation of making excuses for herself. It was not pleasant to go to bed with the consciousness of having been so hasty and unkind in feeling, if not in words and deeds, but it was safer to be humble than to give way to a spirit of self-justification.

CHAPTER XLII.

AND that evening was but the first of many such evenings. The whole day, indeed, had been but a sample of what Katharine was to bear for the next ten days; only each hour's annoyance aggravated by the near approach of the time when she was to leave the home of her childhood for ever. Yet she had many things to support her: constant occupation, the knowledge that she was essential to her mother's happiness, and likely to be materially useful to her brother, and especially the sympathy of true friends, whose affection had been gained in happier days, and who now came forward in the hour of sorrow to soothe and comfort her. Mr. and Mrs. Reeves were foremost amongst this number. It almost seemed to Katharine as if they had given up every other claim upon their time in order to attend especially to her. Mr. Reeves was always at leisure now, when Katharine wanted him, and gave her not only comfort but a good deal of straightforward advice in matters not at first sight in his peculiar province. His good common sense made him a most valuable counsellor in a worldly sense, and his deep religious feelings enabled him to put just the tone and spirit into Katharine's way of viewing her troubles which raised them from petty annoyances into crosses to be borne meekly and thankfully for the sake of Him who appointed them.

"Don't try," he said to her one day, "to keep yourself up by secondary motives. They are very useful before people are thoroughly imbued with a religious spirit, but they are merely a loss after-

wards. Persons sometimes, for instance, refrain from hasty words, because, as the saying is, 'they only make matters worse.' Very well that is, as far as it goes: it is better to refrain for that reason than not at all; but a man is not therefore a better Christian. Every trouble, great or small, which meets us in life, is meant to be a step to raise us to Heaven. Some persons take advantage of these steps, others pass them by; and so it is that we see some make so much more rapid progress than others." Katharine had long acted upon the same idea to a certain extent; but it became at this period of her life a more firmly established principle, and often gave her the same kind of healthy energy which a child feels when its lessons increase in difficulty. Mrs. Reeves also assisted her in various ways in which only a woman could help her. She had a quick perception, and great tact, and saw, almost before Katharine had entered into an explanation, what were likely to be her trials at Moorlands; and she could understand what no one else exactly did, all the privations which Katharine would have to bear in the loss of the society which of late years had been so pleasant to her. There were moments when Katharine was inclined to regret that she had ever known it; it seemed, she said, as if she had ventured beyond her sphere, and now she was to suffer for it. But Mrs. Reeves would not allow her to say this. "There can be no venturing beyond your sphere, Katharine," she said, "as long as you keep to the duties of your sphere; and I am sure you always do that. I do very earnestly trust that you will never sink yourself to the level of the ordinary persons you may be obliged to associate with. The good you may do by showing them that you can cultivate your mind, and enjoy reading and conversation, and be brought into

association with persons above you in rank, and yet have sufficient self-respect to keep the worldly position in which you were born, will be incalculable." Katharine thought for a moment, and then said, "But, dear Mrs. Reeves, even if I succeed myself in doing this, which I am sure, however, I do not as I ought, I can never influence others; there is nothing so difficult, and perhaps I see more of the case than you do. Persons are constantly imagining, that because I know you, and go over to Maplestead to see Mrs. Forbes, therefore I am quite on a footing with you, and they even try to make me angry sometimes, because I am not asked to parties. But I can't be angry," she added simply, "because I never expect it, and I should not like it."—"I don't think you would like it, Katharine," replied Mrs. Reeves, "any more than I should like to be invited to Rilworth Castle, when the Duchess of Lowther has a party of fashionable London ladies to visit her. There is a sense of unfitness in such associations."—"And yet," said Katharine musingly, "I don't exactly know what answer to give when persons talk to me in this way. I feel I am satisfied, but I don't know why. And as to your visiting at Rilworth Castle, I am sure you must be fit company for any person. It is all very puzzling."—"And so I hope I am fit company for any one," said Mrs. Reeves, smiling; "and so I think you are, Katharine. But it does not follow that we are therefore to wish to overthrow the forms of society. I think, Katharine," she added, "that your friends would be more satisfied as to your position, if they would remember that the same distinctions exist in every rank of English society, and that well-bred people are quite contented they should remain. I will speak of myself, as you first spoke of me. I really believe that, as

regards education, I am just as well educated as the Duchess of Lowther — perhaps better in some respects ; and, if I were to meet her, I could be as easy in her society as I am in yours. We do meet occasionally ; and then we are cordial and free as you and I might be. But she is still the Duchess of Lowther, and I am the wife of a private gentleman,—I put aside his being a clergyman,—and neither education, nor Christian principles, require us to overlook those worldly distinctions. The Duchess, therefore, very properly keeps to her own set of intimate friends, and I keep to mine. We often meet, indeed, on neutral ground which is common to us both, and the Duchess never fails to show Mr. Reeves the respect due to his office ; but when worldly things are in question, such as grand dinner parties, and other forms of society, we mutually agree to be governed by worldly rules.”

“ But what people say to me sometimes,” said Katharine, “ is, that education makes all the difference, and that if persons are well educated they are equal to the Queen, or any one. I don’t mean that that applies to me,” she added, blushing, “ because I have not been well educated.”—“ I think I see where the difficulty lies,” replied Mrs. Reeves ; “ highly educated persons in the professional classes meet with society among themselves to satisfy them. Clergymen’s families associate with clergymen’s families, for instance, and find themselves very pleasant companions, and so they are not tempted to wish for anything beyond ; but this is not the case with the generality of persons in trade, in this generation at least ; perhaps things may be different in the next. In former days education was but little thought of amongst them, and so parents who were ignorant allowed their children to be ignorant also ; and now, when young people begin to read and

think, they do not find sympathy and companionship in their own set, and then they seek it in those above them.”—“And find it,” said Katharine, gratefully; “at least if they are like me.”—“But all are not like you, Katharine,” replied Mrs. Reeves; “a great many have their heads turned at the same time that they have them filled, and so they think that because they are equal in one point they are equal in all; which is just as if, because I can play and sing, like the Duchess of Lowther, therefore I must be a duchess myself.” Katharine still looked thoughtful, and a little perplexed. “It is a difficult subject, I confess,” continued Mrs. Reeves, “more difficult in theory though than in practice, as you have found it; but the only way of obviating the difficulty, I suspect, is not to elevate a few individuals above their station, but to raise the tone of the whole; in fact, Katharine, to make a great many others work and study as you have done, and then they will be happy companions for each other, and will not wish to go out of their sphere, because they will have all they want in it.”—“It will be a wonderful kind of education which can do that,” said Katharine, thinking as she spoke especially of Betsy Carter, and the efforts she had often seen her make to put herself into society beyond her position by birth.—“Many persons would think I was very bigoted and prejudiced, if I were to say that only a Church education will do it thoroughly,” replied Mrs. Reeves, “but I do think so; and I think too that one great reason, if not the chief reason, why schemes of education for the poor, or for those above them, have done more harm than good, is, that they have not been based upon the principles of the Church. Mr. Reeves once made me study the Bible, and Church history, in re-

ference to this subject. I remember his pointing out particularly how every one in every class was kept in his proper place ; kings, for instance, having authority, and subjects being bound to obey them ; and masters and servants, fathers and children, all ordered to rule or be ruled ; and yet again and again, all spoken of as one,—one Body, one Building,—because they were all members of the Church, and had the same privileges, and worked for the same object.”—“ Yes,” said Katharine, thoughtfully, “ working for the Church,—that is what has helped me many times when I have been inclined to be discontented ; the feeling that in my place I was as necessary to the work of the Church as any great person ever so clever might be. Mr. Reeves put the thought into my head years ago ; he did not know how useful it would be.”—“ And that not one can be spared,” continued Mrs. Reeves ; “ that is a comfort when one thinks oneself very insignificant.”—“ Yes,” replied Katharine, “ after all one’s boasting about not caring to be thought of consequence, one does care very much.”—“ Perhaps,” replied Mrs. Reeves, “ it was intended that we should care. All those longings for advancement, which are a part of our nature, must be meant to be satisfied in some way. It may be the fault is that people strive to raise themselves in this world, instead of in the next.”—Katharine was still thoughtful. “ I am not,” she said, “ discontented with my own position ; I do not really wish to change it, and I have not the least wish to be introduced into fashionable society. But if I were, what I am not, highly educated, I should think it very hard to be shut out from the acquaintance of nice good people, merely because I was a tradesman’s daughter.” Mrs. Reeves smiled.—“ You would not be shut out, Katharine, if all were like you ; that is, not more

than I am, as I said before, from the society of persons of high rank.”—“ But do you think,” said Katharine, “ that such distinctions of mere rank are right ? ”—“ Yes, most unquestionably,” replied Mrs. Reeves, “ for the simple reason, that they are fully recognised in the Bible. It is possible,” she continued, “ that in the course of years education and good manners may have spread through all ranks ; yet we have no reason to believe, even then, that all will be outwardly equal.”—“ It will take a very long time,” said Katharine, “ to make such a change as that.”—“ Not, perhaps, so long as we may think,” replied Mrs. Reeves ; “ refinement spreads very rapidly, as we see by past experience. Old books which describe the manners of clergymen’s families, and lawyers’, and physicians’, show us how very strange, and what we should now call vulgar, they were ; and so before them we hear of lords and ladies doing what would shock us. There will be the same change probably in years to come.”—“ But we may not live to see it,” observed Katharine.—“ We may see a good deal of it, if God should spare our lives to old age,” replied Mrs. Reeves. “ We see the commencement now ; only, unfortunately, in many cases the improvement begins at the wrong end,—accomplishments, which ought to be the finish, are made the foundation ; and, as a natural consequence, the persons who devote their time and thoughts only to such things are just as vulgar as they were before, their minds are not cultivated, and they have no idea of real good-breeding.”—“ Perhaps so,” replied Katharine, with an air of thought ; “ but how can it be otherwise ? ”—“ Only by a certain number of persons setting a different example,” replied Mrs. Reeves. “ You, for instance, may do, and have done a great deal.”—Katharine quite started with surprise.—

"Yes," continued Mrs. Reeves, "I can see it, though, naturally enough, you do not. Miss Carter, for instance, is very much less pushing and disagreeable than she used to be; and I am sure you have taught her; and now she is bringing up her little sister to be quiet and retiring, and is educating her well and sensibly at the same time. Just imagine if this were the case in Rilworth universally, what a change there would be in the society!"—"It would be intolerable!" exclaimed Katharine; "they never would content themselves with remaining in their own position."—"I beg your pardon, Katharine; if they were educated as I mean, they would be perfectly contented; just as contented (to return to the old simile) as I am when I have to visit Mrs. Lane instead of going over to Rilworth Castle. Remember, I am imagining the case of well-bred persons, and the very essence of good-breeding is to keep in your own position."

There was a silence of a few moments. Katharine broke it by saying, "Still the old question recurs, if people are all to be well-bred and well-educated, why are there distinctions?"—"And I must repeat again, because God has appointed them," replied Mrs. Reeves gravely. "I do not mean," she added, "that when all classes are equal in education, the distinctions will exist to the same degree; of course they will not; but I am sure we shall find that if they are quite set aside, the result will be not that all persons will be equally refined, but all equally vulgar."—"I don't see why," replied Katharine. —"Is it not," asked Mrs. Reeves, "because of one of the distinctive characteristics of Christian good-breeding is overlooked—that of giving honour where honour is due? The Church teaches that lesson," she added, "just as strongly as it does that we are all one."

The conversation ended here, for it was Katharine's dinner hour ; and perhaps it was fortunate for her that it did. Although much more satisfied, she might only have been perplexed by further conversation upon a subject which involved such frequent reference to herself. She was quicker in her perceptions of how she ought to act than she was in her powers of thought. Simplicity and humility had refined her taste and given her great delicacy of feeling ; but she was not used to self-contemplation, except in the form of examination as to her faults, and did not always understand herself. Probably the very fact of seeking to know more of her own mind would have destroyed the charm of her character.

CHAPTER XLIII.

TEN days passed away rapidly ; yet in looking back upon them they seemed a month, so much had been done in them. Katharine was too busy to go again to Maplestead, but she heard daily reports from Mr. Fowler, and upon the whole they were satisfactory. Jane's amendment was rapid—that is to say for the first few days ; afterwards Mr. Fowler said she was languid, and did not gain strength as she ought. There was always something doubtful in his way of speaking of her thorough recovery ; and if Katharine had not known the hidden mischief which might at any moment burst forth, she might have thought him what Colonel Forbes had called him—"a croaker." He might indeed have been influenced, in his opinion, by a feeling of pique. Since Dr. Lowe had been

called in, he had been only allowed to act under his orders ; but the little details which he gave convinced Katharine that the evil was only lulled for the time.

The last day at home arrived, and would have been very overpowering, if Katharine had had time to think ; but, happily for her mind though not for her body, she was not allowed one moment of rest. The necessary good-byes had been said before. Those to the poor people were the hardest of all to bear, for Katharine would not delude them by the hope of assistance which she knew that most probably she should be unable to give. The district would be left without a visitor for the present. Mr. Reeves had announced the need there would be for help, but no one had come forward to offer it. When Katharine thought over her acquaintances, to see who could be asked to supply her place, she could not fix upon a single individual who had apparently leisure to take it. Rilworth was a very busy place, and there were few persons living there who were not engaged in some profession or trade, or had not some pressing family occupation. And when every hour in the day had had its claim of duty already, how could more be undertaken ?—Mr. and Mrs. Reeves came to see Katharine and her mother the last evening, and Katharine managed to have a little conversation with them alone. The subject of the district was mentioned, and she spoke almost despairingly about it, and as a last resource offered still to continue to be a visitor herself ; but this Mr. Reeves would not hear of. “ She was going,” he said, “ into a sphere of new duties, and it would not do to burden her with old ones ; besides,” he added, “ we never materially benefit the world by taking upon ourselves the business which ought to fall to the share of others.

Rilworth people are busy ; I own ; but they are not too busy to eat, and drink, and sleep, and pay visits, and enjoy holidays : and though I give them credit for being very industrious, I really cannot believe they are such admirable managers of their time already, as not to admit of any change by which they shall have leisure for the poor. It is the will which is wanting. Tell them that they are to gain a hundred pounds, or fifty, or thirty, or even ten pounds, by giving up two or three hours in the week to being district visitors, and you would be overrun with applications. No, let the district go on as it can for the present. Mrs. Reeves and myself will take care that there shall be no great distress, and in the meantime I shall hold it up as a disgrace to the town. The young men—those are the persons I want to get hold of. Give me half a dozen Charles Ronaldsons and I would consent to part with half our police, if not the whole. And I do not despair,” he added. “We are attaching some to the Church in various ways ; by lending them books, for instance, and making them join the Church singing class, and things of that kind, and by degrees one may hope to enlarge their notions of duty.”

“I am not sure they will thank you, sir,” replied Katharine, smiling. “I know myself that I always have a feeling, when I see you, that you are going to open my eyes to something I have neglected.”—“But you would not like to have your eyes closed again, Katharine ?” said Mrs. Reeves kindly. — “Perhaps not,” replied Katharine ; “but it gives one a perpetual sense of short-coming, and when one thinks one has done all there is still a mist of unfulfilled duties behind.”—“To make us feel that we are unprofitable servants,” said Mr. Reeves. “So it must be always. They who do the most alone know

how much is left undone.”—“Yet I can so well enter,” said Katharine, “into the feelings of a friend of mine, who was obliged to lie down for years, and said it was such a comfort to have all responsibility taken away, and to feel that she could do nothing but be resigned.”—“That must have been a very active person in years before,” observed Mr. Reeves. “There is no pleasure, but rather exceeding bitterness in feeling helpless for the present, and useless for the past. However, the time must come for you, and for me, and for all, when our only responsibility will be resignation.”—“Yes,” said Katharine, “it is that thought which often keeps me up now. There is one verse which sometimes quite haunts me: ‘Be not weary in well doing.’”—“‘For in due season ye shall reap if ye faint not,’” added Mr. Reeves solemnly; and then in a lighter tone he added, “And now you must tell me a little more in detail what your well doing at Moorlands is to be.”—“Keeping the children in order principally, I suppose,” said Katharine. “My mother will overlook the farmhouse work, and I rather hope she may like it.”—“But don’t make yourself too useful,” said Mr. Reeves seriously, yet with a lurking smile about his mouth. “Remember, you won’t do your sister-in-law any real good by teaching her to depend upon you when she ought to depend upon herself.”—“That is a gentleman’s way of looking at the case,” observed Mrs. Reeves playfully. “They know nothing about the working of household matters; do they, Katharine? Because they are accustomed to sit by the fire and be waited on, they think it quite easy to see everything about one uncomfortable and yet not to move because it is not one’s place.”—“No,” continued Mr. Reeves, “I do not think it easy—I know indeed nothing is more difficult; but I am quite in earnest in what I say:

Katharine will do ten times the good by making Mrs. John Ashton work that she will by working herself.”—“I shall sit still till it comes to a question of work or ruin,” said Katharine gravely, “then I must work.”—“It will never come to that, I trust and hope,” said Mrs. Reeves.—Katharine repressed a sigh, and answered quietly, “I do not let myself look forward.”—“But—I may ask you the question, I hope, without being thought impertinent,”—said Mr. Reeves; “your income is not dependent upon your brother?”—“No,” replied Katharine; “but an only brother! how could one let him suffer?”—“And an only sister!” said Mr. Reeves rather quickly, “how could he let you suffer?”—“That will not be the question,” answered Katharine, “and I should not wish it to be. My mother’s feeling for John is so very strong.”—“So it may be,” continued Mr. Reeves; “but it will surely never be indulged to your injury!”—“Never intentionally,” replied Katharine; “but if you please, sir, I would rather not talk about that now; it can do no good, and for the present we are very comfortably off. Mr. Lane helped to settle our affairs. My mother is to have a hundred and twenty pounds a year during her life from the shop, and I am to have fifty pounds a year for five years afterwards; and there will be the interest of fifteen hundred pounds which my father had in the funds, and some old debts besides.”—Mr. Reeves considered for a few minutes, and then said: “And you are quite sure you are safe in depending upon young Madden’s making the shop answer?”—“I trust to others,” was Katharine’s reply.—“But you are doubtful yourself?”—“I am not quite satisfied, sir; but it is only a little misgiving, and I feel I ought to trust to those who are so much more experienced in business than I am. There will

be more chance of my mother's being comfortable in that way during her life, and it will be much less troublesome to her. Perhaps," she added, "you will laugh at my chief fidget, but I cannot help wishing that Henry Madden was not such a politician."—"So do I too, Katharine," exclaimed Mrs. Reeves, eagerly, "for his own sake, and that of his customers. I know one or two persons who say that if he goes on in the way he has done, abusing people who differ from him, they shall certainly think it their duty to leave him. "He thinks," said Katharine, "that his own party will uphold him, but I would not trust to that."—"No," observed Mr. Reeves; "it is one thing to uphold a man in words, and another to support him in deeds. He will find the difference by-and-by." Katharine looked grave, and Mrs. Reeves, fancying they had made her anxious, said kindly, "But we need not foretell evil, Katharine, and the business is too well established to be easily shaken; there is not another good bookseller's shop in the town."—"Nor any equal to it in any other town within a distance of thirty miles," observed Mr. Reeves.—"Young Madden is a fortunate fellow if he will only know how to profit by his advantages."—"Yes, if," repeated Katharine rather sadly.—"That is the great question of success in life, is it not, Katharine?" observed Mrs. Reeves. "We all, I suppose, have advantages, more or less, only some use and some waste them." Katharine thought of her brother John, and assented most heartily. Mr. Reeves rose to go, and Katharine went to fetch her mother to say "good-bye." It was a very sad moment for poor Mrs. Ashton; she had kept up astonishingly whilst there was anything to be done or settled; but it was all arranged now, and she had leisure to look at the desolate rooms, stripped of all the lesser articles of furniture which had peculiarly given them

the air of home, and to remember that the outward change was but the type of the far more dreary void which was left in her own heart. She almost repented having agreed to move to Moorlands. Any place in Rilworth would, she now fancied; have been preferable; and Katharine was obliged to warn Mr. and Mrs. Reeves that they must speak encouragingly and cheerfully of everything connected with Moorlands, and especially hold out the prospect of often meeting Rilworth friends, from the distance between the two places being so short.—“We shall often see you in Rilworth in the summer, Mrs. Ashton, I have no doubt,” said Mr. Reeves, as he shook hands with her cordially. “Your son will drive you in and out easily, he has a capital horse.” Poor Mr. Reeves! he had no sooner said the words than he remembered that he had made a most painful allusion. Katharine’s colour changed, and she looked anxiously at her mother. Mrs. Ashton sat down in a chair and her hand trembled nervously. She did not attempt to speak. Mrs. Reeves tried to turn her attention, and remarked that Katharine was such a good walker she should expect to see her at least two or three times a week, if she did not make herself too useful with the children so as not to be spared. The mention of the children caught Mrs. Ashton’s ear, as it always did, and she remarked, with the pride of a grandmother, that they were very fine children, and very good, considering their high spirits, and no doubt now that Kate would be able to attend to them, there would not be better children in the country. “It is certainly a good thing for them we are going there,” she said; “my daughter-in-law has but indifferent health, ma’am, as perhaps you know, and children require constant looking after.”—“And you won’t let your daughter work too hard,

Mrs. Ashton, I hope," said Mr. Reeves, relieved at finding a subject which was not likely to have distressing associations. "I can't feel that she is out of my care though she is out of my parish."—Mrs. Ashton smiled a little. "Kate would not like to think she was out of your care, sir, any more than I should. You have been a good friend to her, I am sure, and Mrs. Reeves too; very kind friends to all of us—all," she repeated, her voice sinking lower; "and it was felt, sir, and talked about. I hope you believe that." She put out her hand and tears coursed each other down her cheeks.—Mr. Reeves could only say, "Indeed I know it; God bless you;" and there was a kind, warm pressure of hands; and then Mrs. Ashton rose and walked away. Katharine followed her friends to the door. The parting was less to her than to her mother, as she would probably have so many more opportunities of seeing them. "There will always be luncheon for you at our house, Katharine," said Mrs. Reeves, "when you walk in from Moorlands."—"And always a corner in my study when you want to talk," said Mr. Reeves. "Remember, we are friends always."

Yes, Katharine felt that nothing worldly could interpose to sever such a tie as theirs.

CHAPTER XLIV.

Six months from that time it was spring; cold and mocking, as the spring in England for the most part is—except when met with in books. A fire had been lighted in the breakfast-parlour at Moorlands, to please Selina, who came down stairs every

morning shivering, and protested she could not eat her breakfast without one, though she would not sit in the room afterwards, because it was not the drawing-room. Katharine was glad of the comfort for her mother's sake, otherwise the two fires were an irritating little piece of extravagance. Mrs. Ashton was better in some respects for the change to the country—she had a better appetite, and her spirits were more even; but she was looking very old,—older, Katharine often thought, than her age; and she was less able to bear up against anything like worry.

Katharine tried to save her annoyance as much as she possibly could; but it was impossible to succeed always. Mrs. Ashton was an extremely active person, and found her chief occupation and amusement in managing the household department of the farm, which Selina was only too glad to give up to her to a certain extent. But she was not allowed to be entire mistress, and, as a necessary consequence, there were perpetual frets. Power was on one side, common sense on the other; a most unfortunate state of affairs for the family peace. Not that Mrs. Ashton was angry, she was too fond of John, and too partial to everything belonging to him to be that; but she was sorrowful, and that to some dispositions is more trying. Selina would willingly have received a good lecture in exchange for the suppressed sighs, and “Ah! in my time it was different!” which met her ear continually. Like the generality of ignorant people, she was very conceited; and even when she admitted her blunders herself, never allowed any one else to second the assertion. She came down stairs this morning very late—not an unusual circumstance—and when breakfast was half-over. A seat had been reserved for her near the fire; and Katharine poured out her tea,

whilst John cut a slice of bread, and asked her if she would not like a rasher of bacon. A very good and comfortable commencement! And Selina, having kissed the two children, and said "good morning," and "thank you," in return for the general civility, began to eat. "You said you would have some bacon, didn't you, Selina?" said Katharine. "Johnnie can run out and order some."—"Why not ring the bell?" asked Selina.—"Because, my dear," exclaimed Mrs. Ashton, "I suspect Anne is out in the back yard."—"Now!" inquired Selina, looking up quickly; "she knows we are at breakfast, and she may be wanted."—"Well! that's very true, my dear; but the fact is, she left the back yard in such a mess last evening with rubbish lying about, that I told her they had better clear it the first thing this morning. So run, Johnnie, and tell her what's wanted."—"I don't see that it's her business to clear the yard," observed Selina, as the child left the room. "Roger ought to see to it."—"He is busy about the fences, Selly," observed John; "and it's Anne who makes the mess."—"Yes," said Mrs. Ashton; "she is very careless, I must say that, and extravagant. All sorts of things I see thrown out there, which in my day would have been put aside and made use of in some way."—"A very odd use, I should think," replied Selina; "at least I am sure I never see anything there that is fit to be touched with a pair of tongs."—"Perhaps not to your eyes, my dear," answered Mrs. Ashton; "because you have never been taught to look after things; but I know I did see yesterday a china plate, and a broken glass, tossed up in the corner, with a heap of dirt and rubbish, which might quite well have been mended, if any one would have taken the trouble. Kate would have put them together in no time."—"Those things never last,

and one can buy plate and glass for a mere song in these days," observed Selina carelessly.—"Not for so little as you think, Selly," remarked John; "at least if people insist upon having cut glass and fine painted china, as you do."—"Oh! that's only for parties," replied Selina. "Of course I expect it then, because I was always accustomed to it; and I didn't marry to come down in the world."—"You may have to do it in spite of that," said John in a tone so low that only Katharine, who was sitting next him, caught it.—Mrs. Ashton, who had been brooding in thought over the back yard and the broken plate, now spoke again: "It is not only about breakages that Anne is careless," she said, "but it's about everything. I declare it's a shame to see what she tosses to the pigs every day. Why there's many a poor creature would be thankful for it. In my days the mistress of a farm wouldn't have allowed a scrap to be wasted."—"She must have had enough to do, then," replied Selina, not looking up from the table, but helping herself to some butter with a pettish air. "I wonder what that girl is about not bringing the bacon."—"You have not given her very much time," observed Katharine gently.—Selina replied by taking upon her plate a scrap of nearly cold bacon left in the dish, which she ate with the air of a martyr. "You will have given trouble for nothing, Selly, if you don't eat the bacon when it comes," said John.—"I am a great deal too busy to wait," answered Selina. "If the bacon had been kept hot for me it would have been all very well." This was said with a reproachful glance at Katharine, who being generally the first to appear at the breakfast-table, was held to be responsible for all that went on there.—"It was stupid of me not to think of it," said Katharine; "but," she added, with a smile, "you must

send us word next time, Selina, when you intend to be late.”—“No need of that,” observed John; “you have but to reckon one day like another, things are all much the same. Take my word for it, there is no one loves her bed better than Selly does.”—“And no wonder, when I go to bed so tired,” replied Selina; “I am sure, John, if you felt what I feel at night, we shouldn’t see you down stairs till nine o’clock in the morning. As it is, I am never later than a little past eight.”—“Half-past eight it was full this morning,” observed John, looking at his watch; “I wish, mother, you could give Selly some of your good habits of getting up early.”—“You should set me a good example yourself, John,” observed Selina sharply; “I hear you say every day that you hav’n’t half time enough for what you have to look after.”—“John is very much improved,” said Mrs. Ashton. “It used to be sad work before he turned farmer. But young people in these days are not at all like what they were in mine. Why, a farmhouse used to be thought nothing of if the mistress wasn’t up at the cock-crowing, seeing after the maids, and looking into the dairy; being here, and there, and everywhere.”—“I suppose in regular farmhouses it is much the same kind of thing now,” observed Selina; “but when I married it wasn’t with the notion of becoming a farmer’s wife.”—“Then you should not have married John,” said Katharine a little thoughtlessly.—Selina pouted: “John never told me I was to be a farmer’s wife,” she said; “he offered me a home in the country.”—“Well! my dear, and you have got it,” observed Mrs. Ashton, in a tone of surprise.—“Yes, so far as wheat and turnips make the country,” replied Selina; “but he knew very well that wasn’t what I meant.”—“I promised you you should have all I could give you,” said John; “and you have got it; I am sure it is not I who

have broken the agreement.”—“People who live in country-houses don’t get up at the cock-crowing, to look after their dairies,” observed Selina. “Perhaps it would be well for some of them if they did,” replied Katharine; “at least if all the stories are true which are told of their extravagances.”—“What will you do when you are a settler’s wife, Selly,” inquired John; “if you can’t manage a farm in England?”—“A settler’s wife is quite different to my notions,” replied Selina; “the work is what every one does, and I suppose I could do the same.”—“But, as you are not going to be a settler’s wife, my dear,” said Mrs. Ashton, “it’s not much good talking about it.” Mrs. Ashton could not help saying this, for she had an unaccountable dislike to the subject.—“Stranger things than that have happened,” observed John; “and, for my part, I don’t see what there is to dislike in the notion. A man goes out, we will say, to Australia,—finds a good climate, food plentiful, and land to be had for the asking; and let him begin with a moderate capital, and work well, and in a few years he has made his fortune.”—“And can retire,” added Selina, an observation which John did not echo.—“A rolling stone gathers no moss,” remarked Katharine; “that is a proverb I have great faith in, John. If you are doing well here, why shouldn’t you be contented to remain?”—“Why should I, if I can do better elsewhere?” said John.—“But you are not sure that you will do better, and it is a speculation,” said Katharine; “and I can’t help dreading speculations.”—“As for that,” observed John, “I have known a great many men who have made speculations which answered, and I don’t see why I am not to be of the number.”—“Because you never have succeeded yet, for one reason,” replied Katharine. “I can’t help thinking now and then,” she added, “that there is

a special ordering in these things, and that some persons are born to succeed by what we call good fortune, and others by hard work; and I am sure good fortune is not our gift, but hard work is. We should never have been what we are if it hadn't been for hard work, should we, mother, dear?" and she turned to her mother, and kissed her.—Mrs. Ashton, who had been sitting very silent and grave while the conversation went on, wiped away a gathering tear and answered: "No, Kate, that's true enough; but I don't see why poor John is to work so hard as to be obliged to go to Australia, or to do anything, in short, but stay here. I am sure we'll help him to the utmost, as we have always told him."—"Thank you, mother," said John, bluntly but heartily; "I know you won't quarrel with me if I take you at your word; but perhaps there are others who may;" and he glanced at Katharine.—"If you mean me, John," replied Katharine, trying not to show that she was hurt, "you know quite well that I would do everything in reason that I could for you; but I do like to see the wisdom of things first, I own."—"So like you, Katharine," said Selina; "always putting spokes in the wheel. But, as I say to John very often, why trouble about having things straight here, and putting yourself under obligations, when you might be off to another country, and set up quite fresh, and live like a gentleman?"—"I thought you were bent upon never leaving Moorlands, my dear," said Mrs. Ashton, in an accent of alarm.—"Not if we can live here as I was led to expect," replied Selina; "but if it's to be a question of having all one's comforts grudged one, and being turned into a mere farm drudge, why then I say, it's better to be off." Every one was silenced by this remark, and all felt it a relief when the slice of hot bacon appeared to

engross Selina's attention. Katharine was very much pained at the turn the conversation had taken; observations of the same kind had been made before, but never so strongly, and she began to think over what she had said, and to consider whether she was in the habit of interfering unnecessarily.

John sat playing with his knife and fork for some minutes, and then rose suddenly, and said he must not waste time there any longer, and left the room. Katharine followed him: "Are you so very busy, John? Might I say just one word to you?" He stood still in the passage. "If you would just not talk about Australia before my mother!" said Katharine, beseechingly; "You don't know how it frets her. It is all nonsense, I know; but she does not think it so."—"I'll tell you what, Katharine," replied John—and he opened the door of a little back room, used as a store-room, and, making her enter, closed it carefully again—"it is not so much nonsense as you may think for. It's all very well to talk of stones gathering no moss because they are rolling stones, but if they gather none by standing still, why then they must roll."—"But you are gathering, dear John, are not you? I thought everything was going on better."—"That's because you know nothing about it, Kate; but what troubles me now, and troubles Selina too, is a present pressure. I didn't want to talk to you about it if I could help it, but I can't. There's a debt." Katharine's heart sank. "A question of thirty pounds."—"Owing to whom?" asked Katharine, quickly.—"Well, it's a question between Charles Ronaldson and me. You see, it was when the rent was behind-hand in the winter, just after you came here, and when all things else were comfortable. I wrote to Ronaldson, and he wouldn't let me say anything to my mother or you, for fear

of worrying you, and we both thought that if we could get over the difficulties at that moment all would go well, and so he advanced me the money; and Selly was then so bent upon remaining here, that she agreed to promise him repayment from thirty pounds which was to come to her by the legacy; you remember, when old Miss Fowler died, it was left her. I trusted to that, and now I find that the money is gone. Selly says she could not help it—that she was obliged to pay some old bills for her dress and the children's, and buy some new things, and that she could not ask me, and so she took the thirty pounds. I can't say how that may have been, it's no use to inquire now, but sure enough the money is gone." — "Thirty pounds!" said Katharine; "such a very large sum that is. What can she have done with it?" — "No matter for that, Kate," exclaimed John, who, like most husbands, especially disliked his sister's finding fault with his wife; "the question is what is to be done now. The loan was for six months, and I promised Ronaldson he should have it back again to the day, because he told me he should be hard up on account of having to help some relations this year." — "Then it must be repaid," said Katharine, thoughtfully. — "Yes, but how? I have not ten pounds to spare." — "If Selina promised it, she is the person responsible," said Katharine. — "But what is the use of talking of a person's responsibility when there is nothing to be responsible with?" — Katharine felt herself a great coward, yet she spoke bravely: "You must forgive me, John, dear," she said, "if I say anything to vex you. I don't mean to do it, but this sort of thing may happen again, so it is best to be open at once. If it was a question of helping you about the farm, or if you had got behind-hand from bad seasons or losses, it would be

a different matter ; but if the money has gone for Selina's pleasure, I don't think really it ought to come upon my mother, which is, of course, what you are looking to. You know the old debts have fallen off to much less than we expected, and what with the expense of removing, and one thing and another, my mother will have but a very poor year; in fact, I know that she couldn't possibly let you have the money without great difficulty, such as would very much worry her, and she is not well enough or strong enough to bear that kind of thing. She has never been used to business, and it presses upon her, and so I do think that the money ought to be found some other way."—"How?" was John's short reply.—"Well! I think Selina ought to go to her father. He is making money now, and he has done nothing scarcely for her since she married. It really is not fair, John, that all the burden should fall upon my mother."—"Thank you, Katharine," said John; "and for your information I may tell you, that you may just as well ask that wall for money as old Fowler."—"Possibly, yet still he ought to be asked, and Selina ought to ask him."—"You may tell her this," said John; "I shall not, trust me." He paced the room in evident anger; then stopping, exclaimed, "It is very well for you, Katharine, to throw off all obligation upon Selly and me, but I can tell you, you have got your share of it too. If it was not for the old feeling, Ronaldson would never be the friend to us he is, you may depend upon that." Katharine felt herself turn pale; but it was the only sign of emotion which she gave, and she replied, in a tone of unconcern, "I don't see what that has to do with the question in point."—"Well, other persons do, if you don't," replied John; "Selly said to me this morning, when I talked of writing to Ronaldson, and letting

him know that the affair must stand over for the present, that she was certain if you knew it you never would allow it, for it was all done for your sake.”—Katharine’s sensitive feelings were touched to the quick ; and she was no longer calm as she replied, “ Selina has no business to make Mr. Ronaldson’s feelings or mine a matter of calculation ; and she has no right to say that all he has done has been for my sake. She can know nothing of the matter, and I beg, John, that you will tell her so from me.”—“ Umph ! ” exclaimed John, opening his eyes ; “ I didn’t know, Kate, we could have such a spirit now—it’s quite like the old times.” Katharine turned to the window, and did not speak. John looked at her for a few moments, and seeing that she was really annoyed, his affectionate feelings were worked upon, and he went up to her, and said, patting her shoulder, “ Come, Kate, don’t be angry : where’s the harm, after all, of thinking that a man is not a weather-cock ? ”—“ Because there is no foundation for what you say,” replied Katharine, still averting her face ; “ and if there were, I don’t know. — I can’t bear it’s being made a matter of calculation. I — Oh ! John, if you would never say such things again ! ”—“ But why care, Kate ? ” asked her brother kindly, yet with some surprise ; “ if it is all moonshine, what does it signify ? ”—Katharine’s heart throbbed quickly, then it stopped for an instant. She felt very guilty, for she could not bear that suggestion. “ I don’t know why I care,” she said, “ I can’t talk about it.”—“ Well, you women are most unaccountable beings,” exclaimed John ; “ one never knows what to be at with you. I should have thought, now, you would have been flattered by the notion of a man like Ronaldson keeping true to you for so many years, and it would have seemed most natural that you

should have looked kindly upon him. But you never were like any one else, Katharine, and so I shall tell him." — "Tell him? for pity's sake what do you mean, John?" exclaimed Katharine, in a voice of agony. John had evidently spoken very incautiously, for he did what men are not much in the habit of doing—he coloured and looked confused, and turned off the answer hastily, saying, "After all, that's nothing to the point; am I to write and tell him he can't have the money?"

Both John and Selina had judged so far wisely, that Katharine could less bear the idea of that now than before; but she still kept to her first opinion, and repeated that an application ought to be made to Mr. Fowler. John was annoyed; but there was sense in what she said, and he could not gainsay it. They both stood for some time in silent thought, and then John, without uttering another word, walked away, closing the door behind him with violence.

Katharine longed to bring him back; she felt as if she must return to the subject which had so quickly escaped her. She must know what John alluded to, and what he thought of saying to Charles Ronaldson. That was more important to her far, at the moment, than the question of the money. The old feeling! — surely John had some reason for thinking that it existed. Could anything have been said to him? Was it only Selina's gossip? And what did he mean by declaring he would tell Charles that she was unlike every one else? How would it be possible for him to touch upon the subject unless Charles himself had commenced it? Perhaps he had done so; perhaps — Katharine started, and awoke to the consciousness of indulging a dangerous dream, one which pained and humbled her. She was thinking of one who, it might be, had given up

all thoughts of her. With a strong mental effort she dashed aside the thought, and returned to the unwelcome consideration of the debt.

CHAPTER XLV.

THAT debt was paid by Mrs. Ashton; so were many others — some of them John's, many Selina's. The family expenses did not decrease, as Katharine had hoped they would; and John's income did not increase, as John had insisted it must. It was difficult to say exactly where the fault lay; but probably the chief cause of blame was with Selina. John certainly worked hard; but he was not an experienced farmer, and what he gained his wife spent. So, again, Mrs. Ashton was an excellent manager; but the orders which she gave Selina contradicted. Katharine, too, not only preached but practised economy, diligently and perseveringly, especially as regarded the children; but she was the aunt, Selina the mother. Her authority was not paramount, and Selina was jealous of it, and often opposed it from the mere desire to show, as she said, that she was mistress in her own house and over her own children. Often and often Katharine recurred to her father's words,—his prophecy (as it now seemed) that she would be the best friend the little ones would have,—in order to support her in the task she had undertaken. Yet this, perhaps, was the least trying work she could have had; for, notwithstanding all Selina's follies, the children did repay in a great measure the labour bestowed upon them. They were excessively fond of Aunt Kate, and always obedient to her, however

trying and naughty they might be with others. They were quick too in learning, and Katharine found it quite pleasant to be obliged from duty to recall some of her own lessons learnt at Mrs. Richardson's; and they were an excuse also for many independent walks, and gave her opportunities of visiting amongst the poor. She remembered Mr. Reeves' injunction, not to make herself too necessary to Selina; but it was very difficult to keep it, especially when she felt that if she were not there it would be requisite either to have a governess for the children, which would be an expense beyond her brother's means, or else leave them entirely to neglect. It seemed better at once to assume the duty which was put upon her, and make it her own, and in that way to draw a definite line, beyond which she was not to be required to go.

This resolution was adhered to. Selina would often willingly have taken advantage of Katharine's being at home to leave some household duty to her superintendence, and then go herself into Rilworth, to spend an idle gossiping afternoon with old and new acquaintances; but Katharine in these cases took her own view of what was right. She had the care of the children in the afternoon, when the nurse was busy, and she always took them out for a walk; and this reason she gave and persisted in, when Selina would fain have put the children aside, and locked them up in the nursery to play, whilst she made Katharine do her work, and went herself in search of amusement.

Selina did not love Katharine the more for all this. It was extremely irritating to a person of her selfish disposition to have some one always in the house so useful that she could not be spared, and so quietly determined to follow her own views of

right that nothing could turn her, and yet so good and superior that every one unconsciously deferred to her.

And Katharine herself was not perfect; she had the natural defects which seem inseparable from the good qualities that made her what she was. She could not always speak gently, or conceal her disapprobation; and still oftener she was tempted to give advice at awkward moments. Most earnestly religious she was, most entirely humble, — the first to see her own faults, and acknowledge them; but all this was lost upon Selina. The candour, and simplicity, and sincerity, which would have neutralised defects greater than Katharine's in the eyes of those who could value her as she deserved, were not perceived or understood by Selina. One hasty word, one incautious observation, was treasured up and brooded over, and exaggerated; and days, and weeks, and months of kindness and energy, and never-wearied forgetfulness of self, were counted as nothing in comparison. The smallest divergence in the direction of two lines may lead to infinite separation. So it must be in the natural world, so it may be in the moral. Yet the breach widens day by day imperceptibly; and in the case of Katharine and Selina, perhaps only a very keensighted person would have traced it to its results. One indication of what these might be was to be found in the frequent recurrence to the old painful subject of emigration. Before Mrs. Ashton settled at Moorlands Selina had been in despair at the thought, now she was constantly bringing it up, — alluding to it, — speaking of it, — as a possibility; sometimes even urging it, in a way which made Mrs. Ashton unhappy, and Katharine angry. For, notwithstanding John's forebodings, Katharine herself had greater hopes than she had ever had before

of the success of the farm ; partly, perhaps, she was buoyed up by Charles Ronaldson's judgment, but in a great measure the opinion was the result of her own observation. Selina was the great difficulty here, as she was in almost every other case ; and Katharine often found herself sighing, as in the old days, and repeating, " Oh ! the marriage."

That constant occupation, constant fret and anxiety, formed Katharine's outward life. There were two other lives : one, known but to few, of cherished affection, and the cultivation of her higher tastes ; and the other, dependent upon the former, yet above and beyond it, seen only by the eye of God.

The latter is a life of which it is given to human beings to judge only by external signs, and those often liable to misconception ; yet it would have been impossible to watch Katharine Ashton's daily conduct, her devoted attention to her mother, her habitual self-control, her forbearance, and patience, and humility, and unselfishness, and not feel that the principles which influenced her must have something in them unlike those of the world. Katharine was consistent, the world is inconsistent. But Katharine never spoke of her feelings ; she did not always know that she possessed them. She was as free from self-consciousness now in religion as she had been in her early days in things of less moment. One motive was always present to her, guiding, checking, urging her ; but she seldom examined it, except in its effects, and certainly she could not have described it. It had become literally a second nature. As in her childhood, she loved her parents without effort or change, not realising her affection to herself, yet constantly acting upon it ; so now she loved her God.

And the trials of life were light to her ; light

even was the sorrow which lingered by her father's grave; light the annoyance of her daily life; light the cloud of trouble which rested upon the future. The burden was borne for her, and it left few traces, even upon her outward form. It would not have been so with all persons.

As there are trials so keen that even the most obedient, submissive hearts are wounded by them to the quick, so also there are those, good, devoted, pure-minded, whose nature, being less buoyant, will sink under the same pressure which others bear with composure. If Jane Forbes and Katharine Ashton had changed positions in life, they would have gone through the same amount of suffering with very different results as regarded their own minds, and probably, also, as regards the consequences of their trial. Had Katharine been in Jane's place, Colonel Forbes might never have become the domestic tyrant which he was; and had Jane been in Katharine's place, Selina might possibly have contented herself with the usefulness of a person so entirely enduring, and so gentle in the expression of her disapprobation, and never have felt the wish to change her home at Moorlands for the life of a settler's wife in Australia. The difference between the two was not a question of feeling. Katharine's feelings were as acute and intense as Jane's, but she was braver, both physically and morally; Katharine would have been courageous without religion, Jane was so in consequence of it. Religious principles must necessarily be stronger than any others, and therefore in bygone days Jane's power over Katharine had been very marked; now they were in that respect on an equality, and Katharine's superior strength of mind resumed its natural influence. Very touching it was to watch the progress of that influence as months glided by. Jane,

in the midst of luxury and refinement, struggling against a deeply-rooted sorrow, and the forebodings of depressing illness, and resting with the confidence of long-tried affection upon the simple-hearted, energetic, earnest mind, which had received through her means the first strong impulse of spiritual growth; and Katharine, humble, and self-distrusting, yet, impelled by her own sound judgment and quick perception, watching over Jane with the tender reverential care of a nurse over a cherished foster-child.

There was much need for such care. Katharine was learning to put aside the thought of Colonel Forbes, and bear with coldness, and almost incivility, for Jane's sake. How long the endurance might be required who could say? If Jane were fading, it was by very slow degrees, and the spring of life in one so young might last for many years. But Katharine never thought of her as living to old age, or even middle age. When once her eyes had been opened to Jane's danger, she could see how every little vexation and care worked upon her bodily frame; and if it did not increase the tendency to disease, at least weakened the strength required to bear up against it.

And Colonel Forbes knew all this. He had been told of the possible evil; he had been shocked and distressed, and for a time had shown Jane such tender affection, that Katharine could not wonder at the fascination which, in former days, he had exercised over her. When he was really kind, the charm of his manner was such as it seemed scarcely possible to resist. But the first alarm passed off, the danger seemed to have been magnified, and then the old selfishness returned, and Colonel Forbes was selfish and exacting as before. His first softened feelings had, however, been a great assistance

to Katharine in retaining her footing at Maplestead. When Colonel Forbes was told that the state of his wife's health was such as to render quietness of mind and freedom from vexation essential even for her life, he would have been less than human if he had refused to allow her the occasional sympathy of the person who, more than any other, really seemed to understand her feelings, and to be able to decide wisely upon the little doubtful points arising from illness and the cares of a household. And Colonel Forbes knew well that he had himself cut his wife off from the friendship of the persons more immediately in her own rank. He had severed her even from his relations. His sisters would not, like Jane, bear with his temper, and submit implicitly to his will. They seldom came to Maplestead ; when they did, it was as formal visitors. Jane's only friend, before marriage, had been her mother, and she had had no opportunity of making any since ; for Colonel Forbes, caring for nothing but politics, would invite to his house none but political allies, and would not give himself the trouble to entertain ladies merely for the sake of politeness, though, if it were to gain a political point, he did not scruple to fill his house with them. When Jane, now and then, proposed inviting the few persons amongst her acquaintances whose society she felt inclined to cultivate, she was stopped by the remark, " Really, my love, we are so little alone, I should think you might allow us to be these few days together without any one." Jane had by degrees become accustomed to this state of things ; and perhaps she would not at last have wished to alter it. Illness indisposed her for the labour of entertaining guests—that was one feeling ; but another, and probably a much stronger one, was, that even now she could not feel anything to be a pleasure which her husband did not share.

Katharine could never have been to her what she was if their intercourse had commenced after Jane's marriage. It was the early tie, which could not be broken ; and it was this which induced Colonel Forbes to bear with it. A new feeling might have excited his jealousy, but this was an old, lingering weakness, which he did not approve, but which he endured, because Jane was not in a state to allow of its being put a stop to.

But even without this unusual spirit of forbearance on the part of Colonel Forbes, it would have been extremely difficult to quarrel with Katharine. She was so entirely unobtrusive, the most fastidious taste could not have been offended by her simple, even homely manner ; the most sensitive ear could not have caught a shade of undue familiarity in her tone. Utterly devoid of pretension, with a quiet self-respect, and inborn dignity of mind, she was precisely the same when conversing with Jane at Maplestead as in the back parlour behind her father's shop ; and this propriety of feeling was useful to Jane, as well as to herself. There were times when Jane, in the fulness of her gratitude, and the strength of her feeling for Katharine, might have been induced to make her her companion in a way which would have irritated her husband. It seemed unkind, for instance, after Katharine had been talking with her for perhaps an hour before luncheon, entering into her plans for the poor, suggesting arrangements for her comfort, taking from her the work of keeping charity accounts, to allow her to go home without showing her the common civility of offering her refreshment, and Jane often pressed her to remain ; but Katharine never allowed herself to take advantage of the offer, and put herself in Colonel Forbes' way. She saw that if she could ever hope

really to be a comfort to Jane it must be by the unobtrusiveness which her own good taste suggested. It might be very right in Jane to wish to show her attentions, but it would be neither right nor wise in herself to accept them. And by this means she retained her footing in the family under circumstances which would have been fatal to one less simple-minded. For Colonel Forbes was not a man to forget his enmity, even when the immediate cause had passed away. Four months after Katharine's removal to Moorlands he was elected member for the county by a triumphant majority; but John Ashton, though he would not vote against him, refused to vote for him; and all his especial friends.— Henry Madden in particular— exerted themselves for the opposite candidate. These deeds were treasured up to be avenged when the fitting opportunity should arrive. In one way Colonel Forbes' feeling was shown at once— his custom was taken from all the chief tradesmen in Rilworth who were known to hold contrary opinions to his own. Henry Madden was the first to suffer; and, through him, Mrs. Ashton, Katharine, and, as a consequence, John and Selina, suffered likewise. Jane had long expected this; but it fretted her excessively when the order was given to put the threat in execution. She hoped at first that the personal inconvenience caused by it would have induced Colonel Forbes to relent; but he was a martyr to his cause, and when he found that he could not provide himself with books and periodicals as easily as before, he took great trouble, and entered into considerable expense, in assisting to set up an opposition shop, which was to be patronised by all the leaders of his party. Jane could have borne the annoyance well enough if the question in point had been one of religious or moral

interest ; but it was only one of finance, extremely important, doubtless, to the general interests of the county, but upon which very good people might well be allowed to differ. Colonel Forbes' example was followed by others ; the arrangements for the opposition shop were progressing speedily ; and in the meantime no member of the Maplestead family was allowed to have any dealings with Mr. Madden, and whatever could not be purchased at the smaller shops in Rilworth, was sent for direct from London.

It went like a dagger through Jane's heart, to hear Katharine say—as she did without remembering the complaint implied in her words—that Mr. Madden was dreadfully disappointed at the profits of the business, and already began to think that it would be impossible to keep to his engagement, as to the yearly sum he was to pay ; but that was one of the few topics upon which it would not be wise to enter, and Jane passed off the remark at the time, but kept it to brood over, and distress herself afterwards.

And so time wore on, bringing few marked changes, yet all things working secretly towards the accomplishment of the allotted trial of each, even as from the hour of our birth the imperceptible progress of decay is leading us forward to the final hour of death.

Jane spent the summer at Maplestead in better health and spirits. Now that Katharine was at Moorlands, she was much happier about all her little plans for the poor people. She had not much assistance from the clergyman of the parish, who was an old man, and lived at some distance ; and hitherto she had been obliged to give up all that she could not actually superintend herself. But Katharine managed a large share of active work in her walks with the children, and found it very

pleasant to have an object beyond mere exercise, and, perhaps, was not sorry to have an excuse for frequently going to Maplestead. A few people in Rilworth were still occasionally visited, and Mr. Reeves always applied to them for help in cases of extreme distress; but there was quite sufficient for daily care in the poverty about Maplestead; and the apathy of the clergyman threw a great deal of work both upon Katharine and Jane, which was useful as occupying their thoughts, though very painful in other ways. Happily for Katharine, she had respected and obeyed Mr. Reeves as much for his office as for himself, and her principles did not fail her, as is too often the case, when she was left without the help of a clergyman's guidance, or the comfort of the week-day services which in Rilworth she had been able often, though not regularly, to attend.

Towards the autumn, Mrs. Ashton's health began to fail, and this kept Katharine more in the house. She was not anxious at first, for the illness seemed merely the result of a cold; but months went by, and her mother still complained of weakness, and evidently found it an exertion to attend to any household matters; and then Katharine began to be a little uneasy—not openly—not allowing it even to herself in words, but showing it to others by the pertinacious way in which she insisted upon saying that the weather was so bad, no one could expect to be well. Selina did not like illness any more than Colonel Forbes, and often hinted that Katharine encouraged her mother in her fireside habits, and that it would be much better if Mrs. Ashton were roused, and made to go out in spite of the weather; but there was a secret feeling in Katharine's mind which whispered that the "days of mourning" were at hand, and she would not in thought, or word, or deed, lay up one memory of self-reproach to add to the coming sorrow.

She worked very hard all that autumn. Mrs. Ashton fretted herself when she found it impossible to superintend everything as she had been used to do, and seemed to Katharine to have an instinctive perception of mismanagement. Katharine became quite learned in dairy work before many weeks had passed, when she found how quick her mother was in discovering that the butter and cheese were not as well made as they ought to be; and looked after the back yard, and the poultry, and the pigs, as diligently as if she had been used to them all her life; and she tried too to give little Clara a taste for the same pursuits, for she could see how necessary they would be. Selina's fine lady habits grew more rooted day by day, and if she talked of emigration and the colonies, it was always with the notion of carrying out gay dresses, and giving grand parties when they were settled there.

Winter found the rent behindhand still, and Mrs. Ashton was again applied to to make up the deficiency; precisely what Katharine had expected, but it did not make her the less uncomfortable. Mrs. Ashton gave the money so readily that John, she could see, was quite emboldened by it, and already began to look upon it as his right. His influence over his mother was daily increasing, and in many instances in which formerly she would have had an opinion of her own, or been guided by the advice of Charles Ronaldson, she now acted under her son's direction. This naturally had the effect of inducing Charles Ronaldson to withhold his advice, even when he was asked for it. It was never followed, and so it seemed useless to offer it. The correspondence became less frequent, he no longer talked of wishing to pay them another visit, and it seemed to Katharine that the separation between them was complete. She could not bear to own to

herself the effect which the thought had upon her. There was sufficient to depress her without imagining any humiliating reason. To see her mother gradually sinking into the helplessness of premature old age, and John yielding to Selina's extravagance, and making no effort against her selfish negligence in matters of imperative duty, was quite enough to teach her that life was becoming very serious and anxious; but when she boldly faced the trials which she knew and acknowledged, and strove earnestly to prepare for them in the only way by which she could be enabled to bear them, there was still a burden unrelieved, a weight which could not be accounted for, an aching longing for something she knew not what, or which at least she only guessed, and then endeavoured to forget, when a letter directed in Charles Ronaldson's hand made her heart throb with a feeling of painful excitement.

CHAPTER XLVI.

AND another spring came, warmer and more genial; the buds bursting into leaf, the hedges bright with wild flowers, and the gardens already filled with greenhouse plants. Jane and Katharine were sitting side by side on a bench at the end of the south terrace at Maplestead; the two children playing at a little distance with their nurse. Katharine was looking over the account book of the clothing club, which was not quite correct. She had come over to Maplestead for the purpose of having Jane's assistance in putting it right. The business was not very difficult, and it was soon finished; but Katharine still lingered, unwilling to say what was to be a long good-bye. Jane was going to

London for three months, it might be more ; Colonel Forbes had taken a house for that time, and the family were to remove directly. This was their first long absence since Katharine had been at Moorlands. Colonel Forbes had of course been away long and often on account of his parliamentary business, but Jane had only been with him in London for a few weeks at a time, as her health generally made the country desirable for her. Now there was an idea of putting her more permanently under Dr. Lowe's care, for she had not been as well as usual for some weeks past.

"They will not play so merrily in London, I am afraid," said Jane, looking fondly at her children, as they ran races along the terrace, "or at least I shall not see them. That is what I dislike most in London: here, they are always with me."—"The time will go quicker than you think," replied Katharine, "and then you will enjoy the return home all the more."—Jane paused before replying—then she said quietly, "And if I were not here to see them, they would still enjoy themselves. Sometimes, Katharine," she added, "it seems as if whatever may come would be nothing if I could only know that they would be happy and safe ; and then again, I grow very selfish and have a longing wish, that, if I should be taken from them soon, they may remember me, and that would sadden their lives."—"They would surely remember you, dear Mrs. Forbes," said Katharine, in a tone of calmness, which showed that the possibility alluded to was as familiar to her mind as it was to Jane's ; "but I do not think it need sadden them, at least, not painfully. It would only give them another reason for being good."—"But who will teach them to remember me?" said Jane ; "Philip cannot dwell upon sorrowful thoughts, it is not in his nature."—"God

will teach them, surely," replied Katharine. "I don't think we know or understand how He makes such things work in children's minds."—"Yes," said Jane, "I ought to trust; if it were anything else, I fancy I could easily;—but one's children! Oh! Katharine, you can little think what the thought of that wrench is!"—"I suppose that is the reason why, in the Bible, there are such promises about orphans," said Katharine. "They used to come to my mind very often when I was so unhappy the year before last; and just at first, when I could not do anything else, I used to find them out and copy them into a book."—"That would be good for me too," said Jane; "I have found very often lately, that I cannot attend to reading, and then my thoughts dwell upon the future, and that, I am sure, is not good for mind or body."—"The past would be better than the future, I should think," observed Katharine; "at least, it seems to do me more real good to look upon it."—"It humbles one very much," said Jane.—"But I don't mean self-examination," replied Katharine, "but looking back as if one was reading a book about another person, and seeing how one has managed to travel on so far. If I could have looked at myself," she added, "as I set out in life, and known what was before me, I should have been very much frightened."—"I think I should too," said Jane, in rather an absent manner, "though I had some great advantages—my mother took great care of me when she came from India; but then she had bad health, and at times, I was left very much to myself."—"It seems as if one had been perpetually escaping quicksands," said Katharine. Jane did not instantly reply, she was looking at her little girl, running down the steep slope of the terrace, and often it seemed in danger of falling. "She does not fall, though it seems as if she would," said Katharine, following what she saw

was the direction of Jane's thoughts. Jane smiled. "Oh! Katharine, how quick you are in understanding! She does not fall, but it frightens one to watch her."—"Then, perhaps, it is ordered in great Mercy, that we are not always allowed to see her when she is in danger," replied Katharine.—"Yes, it must be Mercy," said Jane, thoughtfully; "it is want of faith which makes one long to stand and watch her. I wonder what it is that hinders one's faith so much."—"Mr. Reeves once said to me," observed Katharine, "that want of faith was occasioned generally by a fault in one's prayers."—"I have prayed," exclaimed Jane, clasping her hands together, "God knows how earnestly and how often! And at times, Katharine, the prayer has seemed to be answered, and I have felt that I could give them up; that I could leave my darlings to Him without even a passing fear. But it has all gone again. Sorrow has come,—yet not sorrow chiefly," she added, correcting herself, "but cares, and little troubles—things which pain and vex me, and then I have felt that I would give worlds to save them from the same trials, and, as if, though I could bear them myself, yet they would never be able to do so."—"One's prayers are very different at different times," said Katharine; "I am afraid for myself I cannot remember more than a very few which have been so earnest and trusting, that I could really feel I put the whole strength of my wishes into them. But I am sure those have been heard."—"Yet prayers for one's children must have one's whole heart," said Jane.—"I suppose," said Katharine, "they would have all one's heart in them, and something of one's will. It must be difficult to have a very great longing for a child to be happy, and yet to be quite contented that it should not be in one's own way. But then.

I am not a mother, and I can't tell," she added timidly. Jane thought for an instant, "There must be something in that," she said. "I have a will for my children, I know. Perhaps, I ought to pray first to have that set right." — "The having a will of one's own, is one reason," said Katharine, "why I feel it is good to think about what has happened in one's past life. One can see so much more why things were allowed, and how good has come out of evil, and so one learns to distrust one's own wishes." — "But," continued Jane, "there is one wish which cannot be wilful, that those one loves may be kept safe." — "It seems as if it could not be," replied Katharine; "yet, I suppose, if we had quite our will, we should not place them in temptation." — "I am afraid," said Jane, "it is impossible not to wish that." — "But the Bible tells us of the trial of our faith working patience," continued Katharine; "so there may be wilfulness even in the wish for their safety, and that may make our prayers not so acceptable." Jane looked at her in surprise. "You must have thought about it all much more than I have, Katharine," she said; "and yet I have had more to make me think; and years ago, I used to feel that you would come to be taught by me in a certain way." — "I don't feel that I have thought about it at all," replied Katharine, quietly; "and, dear Mrs. Forbes, it was you who first taught me, if I have; but one can't help noticing some things, strange things, not miracles, but what seem quite as wonderful." — "About prayers?" said Jane. "Yes, how some are answered," replied Katharine, "when one could not have expected it; prayers especially which one makes at the Holy Communion; and when I have thought about them, I have always felt they were those which I put my heart into and

my will too ; as if, in a manner, I gave away myself and the persons I love to be taken care of by God, because I could not do anything for them or for myself. I think," she continued, "that it would help me very much if I were anxious as you may be, and could do that heartily."—"Not having any wishes?" said Jane ; "but that is the difficulty."—"Yes," repeated Katharine, "that is the difficulty ; and I don't think it is for those who are not mothers to talk about it ; so perhaps, I ought not to have said what I have."—"Oh ! yes, yes," exclaimed Jane, "you have done me good, talking things over quietly always does."—"It helps me on always, to talk to you," continued Katharine. "Indeed, I never do really talk to any one else except Mr. Reeves now and then ; and I can't put myself side by side with him, and so I don't like to say out little things, and I only go to him when I want him to advise me."—"Mr. Reeves and I used to talk at one time," said Jane, "but we don't meet often now, and there is no one ;"—she stopped. Katharine felt painfully all that was implied by the pause, but she could not notice it. "One thing Mr. Reeves told me one day," she said, "which has helped me a good deal ; it was when I had been saying to him the same kind of things which you have been saying to me, about not having faith, and when he warned me that my prayers might be in fault ; I asked him what was likely to be most amiss in them, and he said that probably I had a strong will of my own, and so was like a person giving a half confidence ; and when I asked him how to get rid of the will, he said, I was to begin practising in very tiny things, such as the weather, or disappointment, or little home worries, never complaining, or fretting, or allowing myself to wish things were different,—but taking just what was given me, as we make

children take what is given them. I remember his saying, that two-thirds of the really good, earnest people we meet travel along the high road of duty like horses badly broken in. They advance, but they are always making little efforts to wander to the right or left; and so requiring the whip and the bridle. The notion helped me a good deal just then, for there were plenty of home troubles.”—“As there are now, I am afraid,” said Jane, kindly, “and here have I been talking of myself all the morning, and not once inquiring about you.”—“The troubles are not much worse than usual,” said Katharine; “only, I don’t think my mother gets on; she is so weak, and has been so restless the last week. Mr. Fowler has given her some new medicine, but it does not agree with her. I don’t let myself think,” she added, trying to speak cheerfully, “about that or anything.”—“Not like me,” replied Jane, and again her eyes rested upon her children. “I have not your trial,” said Katharine, “it is much easier to bear anxiety for oneself than for others; but, then again, yours may only be in years to come.”—Jane considered for an instant. “Yes, possibly; and it is better, as you say, not to think, except,” and she spoke with an intensity of earnestness, “to be prepared. But, Katharine,” she added, suddenly changing her tone, “I must tell you what adds to all my troubles, really aggravates them—my maid. I thought she was going to be perfect, and she has turned out most imperfect. You can’t recommend me one?”—“Immediately?” asked Katharine.—“No, not exactly immediately, I must take Dawson to town with me; and then I have been recommended to try a French maid.” Katharine looked doubtful as to the success of the experiment.—“I am not inclined for it myself,” continued Jane. “I would much rather have a quiet, sober individual from

Rilworth, if you could find me one. But if not, I perceive that some day in utter despair, I shall be compelled to accept the Duchess of Lowther's offer of a Mademoiselle Laurette. So you will bear me in mind, won't you? You know really what I want." Katharine promised,—she had not had much experience of lady's maids herself, but Miss Carter always knew something about them, and she was a safe person to apply to. "And now, dear Mrs. Forbes, please, I must go," said Katharine, rising. "You will be so very good as to let me know sometimes how you are, won't you? I always learn more from what you leave unsaid, than from what other people say." Jane smiled, and declared she must be very careful how she worded her letter,—but she certainly would write, and she trusted that Katharine would sometimes let her know about all the poor people and her own home affairs. "I never forget them, Katharine, though I do live in the whirl of London life," she said.—"No, indeed, I am certain of that," was Katharine's reply; she was going to add something else, but her eye at that moment caught the figure of Colonel Forbes at the other end of the shrubbery near the house. She hurried her departure immediately, and Jane did not press her to remain, though she pressed her hand affectionately, and said, "God bless you, dear Katharine, and give you help at all times."—"Thank you so much," and Katharine turned away, with a glistening eye, and the prayer that Jane herself might never be left without the same aid.

She walked along the terrace, hoping to turn into a side path, and avoid Colonel Forbes, but unfortunately she blundered and came directly upon him: she would have passed on, but—very unlike himself—he stopped her and spoke. It was only, however, to inquire whether her brother was at home.

Katharine never could feel comfortable when any business was going on between John and Colonel Forbes. She had an instinctive perception of the hidden enmity, and a dread that John would in some way or other be injured. "I should be glad to see him if he could call this evening," continued Colonel Forbes. "We go to town to-morrow, as perhaps you know."—"I will tell my brother, Sir," was Katharine's reply, and again she would have moved on.—"In case he should not be able to come, perhaps you will be good enough to give him a message from me," pursued the Colonel. "He called to see me a few days since upon a matter of business. Pray tell him I shall be able to put him in a way of gaining all the information he wants." The manner of this speech was more strange to Katharine than the matter. It was wonderfully cordial, but she did not trust it. Just then the two children ran up to them. They had gathered some flowers, and Jane had sent them for Katharine to take back to Moorlands. "Mamma thinks Mrs. Ashton will like them," said Lucy, "and she hopes you will carry them to her."—"And these are for yourself," continued Philip, and as Katharine bent down to take them, he put his little arm round her neck, and added, "I wish you would go to London with us, Mamma wants it too."—"Oh! do, do," exclaimed Lucy, clapping her hands, and then seizing Katharine's dress to prevent her escaping. "You will not want me in London, Miss Lucy," said Katharine, trying to disengage herself; "there will be so many beautiful sights to see."—"But we shall want you dreadfully," continued Lucy, in a tone which showed that the wish was becoming quite serious; "and you shall go with us to see the sights. Shan't she, Papa? Do make her come, please do." Both the children left Katharine and laid siege to

their father. "Don't, my loves, don't; you will tear my coat;"—and the children shrank back instantly, as children always do when they are addressed in a tone of irritation. "Perhaps Mamma will let you write me a little note," said Katharine, trying to divert their attention, "and tell me all you see in London. I shall like that very much." "And then you will write me a little note?" said Lucy, quickly.—"And me too!" exclaimed Philip, "you will write to both of us; but we would much rather you should go with us," he added, sorrowfully.—"Yes, much rather," repeated Lucy. Katharine kissed them again, and whispered that she hoped they would be very good children, and not give poor Mamma any trouble. "Why do you call Mamma poor," exclaimed Philip, fixing his large black eyes upon her with a curious mixture of anger and astonishment.—"Only because she is ill," said Katharine.—"Is she ill?" asked Lucy, thoughtfully. "Is she very ill?"—"We hope she is not," was Katharine's evasive reply.—"But, really; is she really very ill? Papa will tell me," and the child ran up to her father, who was standing a few paces off, talking to a gardener. "Is Mamma very ill?" she exclaimed, catching hold of his hand and her eyes filling with tears. "Miss Ashton is afraid for her."—Katharine heard the words and trembled. There was the well-known scowl on Colonel Forbes' forehead, as he patted his child's head and answered, "No, darling, no; Mamma is going to be a great deal better; run away both of you and play." Then, as the children stood still, reluctantly, the order was repeated peremptorily, and obeyed. He watched them till they reached the end of the walk; so did Katharine. She felt it would be cowardly to go away and leave a false impression behind her merely because a storm was coming. Yet it was a most

uncomfortable moment. Colonel Forbes drew near slowly, his steps were always rather measured, so were his words. He meant them now to be peculiarly emphatic. "May I beg you, Miss Ashton, to be careful what you say to my children? I have no wish they should be frightened unnecessarily." Katharine apologised heartily and simply. She had no expectation, she said, of having her words so taken up by a child, otherwise she should certainly have been more careful. She supposed they must know that their Mamma was not well. "Of course, of course," replied Colonel Forbes, impatiently, "no doubt they must; but there can be no need to cause exaggerated alarm. I see a tendency to this in all my household," he continued, in a tone which implied that he was determined to put a stop to it. "It does Mrs. Forbes herself harm. It must be injurious to any one to be continually watching symptoms." A truism which Katharine did not deny; but he went on as if she had wished to dispute the assertion.—"The mind acts upon the body, the body again re-acts upon the mind. That perpetual watching and care must be injurious. I believe that Mrs. Forbes would be much better if her illness were never alluded to in her presence; and it is my wish, my especial request, that it may not be." Katharine quite well knew that this was aimed at her. She was expected to make an answer—an humble one—but she could not bring herself exactly to the point required, and replied with considerable boldness, that she quite felt that in many cases, perhaps in all, it was better for the invalid not to think of the illness; but that it was almost impossible for those who were watching, and therefore were anxious, not occasionally, to show their anxiety.—"If they feel it,—if they have occasion to feel it," repeated Colonel Forbes, hastily;

"but I believe myself that it would be much better if they did not feel it. A great deal of this kind of illness is hypochondriac, and perpetual attention increases it. — Mrs. Forbes will, I have no doubt, be a great deal better in London." "Away from you," was implied to Katharine's mind. She felt a little cross, and still more bold. It was rarely she had such an opportunity of speaking out, and she took advantage of it. It was a great comfort, she said, to feel that Mrs. Forbes would have the benefit of Dr. Lowe's advice. All that was to be feared was the excitement of London; she so much required quiet. — "In moderation," observed Colonel Forbes, fretfully. "Lowe recommends cheerful society." — "She feels the late hours very much," said Katharine, her voice almost trembling at her own temerity. — "Mere habit," said Colonel Forbes; "people get into a habit of going to bed at a certain hour, and fancy they can't sit up ten minutes later. But I won't detain you, Miss Ashton, only perhaps you will be good enough to remember my wishes." — Another bow and curtsey, and the disagreeable interview was at an end.

CHAPTER XLVII.

KATHARINE walked home, thinking Colonel Forbes the most cold-hearted, disagreeable of men, and wondering whether, even for his wife's sake, she could ever bring herself to go to Maplestead again.

That was human infirmity; Katharine's temper was not gentle by nature, and she had a good deal to try it. Perhaps her feelings might have been

softened if she could have seen the state of Colonel Forbes' mind after she had parted from him.

He did not go to Jane, or play with his children, or even talk to his gardener, but wandered away till he found himself in a distant part of the grounds, in a straight, narrow walk, bordering the park, and entirely shut out from the public view by a thick laurel plantation. There was nothing to please him in it—nothing that is, but the power of pacing up and down without interruption; but that was a comfort, the motion was regular and lulling, and he required it. He could not have endured to sit still, he could not bear the effort of thought; he shrank from the idea of business. At first he was angry with Katharine, and that made him restless, and then he was cross with Jane, and that added to his disquiet. But it was not anger which caused the weight pressing upon his heart with a load of actual physical oppression. Persons recover from anger—they are able to shake it off, or outward sights and sounds distract them; but this was something which only grew the heavier from every attempt to escape from it. He thought of London,—his parliamentary life,—the friends he was to meet,—the important subjects to be discussed,—the measures to be taken to attain certain long-desired objects. Strange!—but he could not even feel that he cared for them;—he actually could not fix his attention upon them. Ever, as he placed himself by an effort in the position he desired, imagined himself speaking fluently in the House of Commons, addressing his friends, arguing with his opponents, some secret irresistible power dragged him away, and he found himself once more walking side by side with Jane in the beech-tree avenue, or sitting with her in her mother's house, listening to the gentle accents which had first captivated his taste, or the words of holi-

ness, which for the time had made him feel himself a better and a wiser man.

Why did those days revert to him now? They had done their work, they had borne their fruit, and now they were numbered with the dead. A busier life lay before him, with its infinite capabilities of enjoyment, its thousand objects of ambition; and he was walking in the midst of the former, straining every nerve to attain the latter; why, then, should his thoughts turn from them as from a banquet, fair to the sight, but for which the appetite is wanting, to recal the buried joys which could never come again?

There lay the secret—in that one word—never; that word which, as by a spell, opens the eyes of the mind to the perception of the treasures we have possessed and disregarded. Whilst Colonel Forbes lived day by day, with Jane near him, to humour his caprices, watch over his comforts, attend to his slightest wishes, forestal the very secret desire of his heart, the past had little in it to regret. He was loved still with the deep, unselfish, unwearied love, which is the choicest and dearest gift a wife can offer, and he was satisfied. But a doubt had been thrown upon the stability of his happiness. He had, it is true, after the first shock, put it from him; he had trodden it beneath the cares of the world, and there were times when he had forgotten its existence; but though he might crush, he could not destroy it. It bore a charmed life, the life of truth, and ever and anon it would start up when least thought of and most unwelcome, to mar his most eager hopes, and dim the lustre of his most brilliant anticipations.

Colonel Forbes was a selfish man; but his selfishness did not necessarily or even naturally render him insensible; rather it in some degree increased

the keenness of his feelings. Selfish people may be very soft-hearted, and have great longings for sympathy ; and no one could be more keenly alive than Colonel Forbes to anything like coldness, no one could be more quick in perceiving changes of tone and manner. To hear him talk, it might be supposed that he was often a perfect martyr to the absence of kind feeling in the individuals with whom he was in the habit of associating. But he was one of those persons who expect to receive everything, but to give nothing in return. Jane was to live for him—he was to live for his own wishes. And Jane did live for him, and she spoilt him. He saw her giving up her will, bearing contradictions, working beyond her strength, to humour his fancies ; and because she never put forth any wishes of her own, he imagined that he never thwarted her. He would have been a monster if he had not been fond of her ; unquestionably he was ; but it was that fondness which deceives many to their destruction : and if ever, for a passing moment, he was conscious of having been unkind to her, he used to make his love a solace to his conscience, and say to himself, that when he really gave her so much affection, she could have no right to complain of a hasty word. And now he was threatened with the loss of this his choicest treasure, was it in human nature not to suffer ? It is not grief which is the test of true or false affection, but the effect of grief. Colonel Forbes' grief made him angry with his wife when she looked ill—with his friends when they noticed it,—with the physician when he warned him of it,—with Katharine when she even gently hinted at it. He thought to escape from trial by acting as if it did not exist. He was taking Jane to London now quite as much to avoid the wretchedness of

his own forebodings, by plunging into a press of engagements, as with any hope of her receiving permanent benefit from the advice of Dr. Lowe. In fact, to have made medical advice the permanent object of her removal would have been to realise to himself what he was so bent upon forgetting. Katharine must have pitied, if she had known, the trouble of his heart. He had so very little to comfort him. Even when he thought how he had loved Jane, conscience whispered that he had not made her happy; and when it reminded him that he might devote himself to her more fully for the time to come, the miserable, long-indulged habits of selfishness, rose up to make him shrink from the irksome restraint involved in consulting the wishes of another. If all things could only remain as they were — that was his one desire. Life had gone so smoothly with him hitherto — from his childhood he had had every wish gratified—it seemed very hard that change should come. And he had no self-knowledge to show him that it was required. He was a man whose character had always been respected, and whose judgment was considered by many infallible. He was an upright magistrate, a consistent friend, an excellent landlord, a most regular observer of all the outward duties of religion; even more, he never neglected prayers in private, or with his own household. If he had faults, they were, in his own eyes, those of a noble character—pride and hastiness of temper. He did not object to acknowledge these; and sometimes, when in serious moments he considered it necessary to practise a kind of self-examination, he used to think over any particular instance of these offences; and now and then he would speak of them to Jane, and say how much he regretted them. And she, in the simple confi-

dence of her affection, treasured up these rare confessions in her heart, as proofs of the sincerity which she was always hoping for, and always trying to think she had found.

But his virtues, let them be what they might, could not now save him from suffering. He was very unhappy. That strange, dreary feeling of want of interest in life was something he could not meet or combat with. It was a phantom trial, but even for that very reason the more terrible; and still he would not search into its cause; he would not allow to himself that sorrow was drawing near, that its shadow was even then at his door, but restlessly and impetuously he paced the laurel walk, now venting his anger upon Katharine Ashton's thoughtless folly in filling his children's heads with fancies, and again upbraiding himself for weakness in being so fretted by a word, and striving fruitlessly to turn his mind to the subjects which hitherto had been all sufficient for him.

And in this state of mind Jane found him. It was some distance from the terrace to the laurel walk, and the day was very warm; but she had seen him enter the garden, and fancied he had been looking for her and missed her, and she must therefore, so she said to herself, go and find him; she could not let him worry himself about her. She was repaid, or felt herself so. His face brightened when he saw her, and he made her take his arm, and they went on together. But he still thought more of his own wish to walk than of what she might like. "Are you ready for to-morrow?" he asked kindly and rather anxiously.—"Very nearly, I hope," replied Jane. "There is still some of Dawson's work to be done; she procrastinates terribly."—"We must get rid of her, my dear; I can't let you be worried."—"Katharine Ashton says she

will look out for some one to suit me," replied Jane; "and she will know just the kind of maid I want."—"Possibly, my love, but I should have thought you might have done better to wait till we were in town." He did not at all like the mention of Katharine's name; it brought back his unpleasant feelings. Jane, not from thought, but instinct, the result of long habit, checked herself as she was going to say that she would rather rely upon Katharine's judgment than that of any other person she knew. The pause in the conversation made Colonel Forbes look at his wife, and then he perceived that she was evidently tired. He was less restless himself at the moment, so he proposed that they should sit down for a short time. Jane asked him some questions about his letters, and they began talking as usual upon political subjects. Jane had become a great politician since her husband went into Parliament, and had an opinion upon all points, from free-trade to an embryo railroad. He took out some of his letters to read to her, and she undertook to copy the answers before post time. These things were but trifles, but they were like the genial influence of a fire on a cold day, they roused the feeling which had been benumbed; and cheering himself with his wife's sympathy, Colonel Forbes once again felt happy. And thus they continued to talk for some time, Jane as usual putting her whole heart into her husband's pleasures and wishes, seeing with his eyes, feeling with his feelings; and Colonel Forbes thinking that the comfort he was enjoying was the result of his own good humour and agreeable conversation.

Jane did ask at last whether it was not luncheon-time; but Colonel Forbes was not hungry, and he was in the middle of a declaration of his own views upon foreign policy. So the answer given was—"Not quite;" and the dissertation went on.

Again, after the lapse of ten minutes, Jane ventured to suggest that luncheon must surely be ready, and again the hint was put aside with the reply, "We will go in a few minutes, my dear!" A third time the effort was made, and the answer was almost angry; and at last, after the delay of half-an-hour, Colonel Forbes, having finished all he had to say, stood up, and Jane tried to follow his example, and fainted away.

Alas! for Colonel Forbes' unstable fabric of happiness! What a trying afternoon followed! so lonely, so anxious and uncomfortable! Jane lying upon the sofa, looking most provokingly ill, and Dawson and the housekeeper making respectful side-thrusts at him, by remarking to each other that Dr. Lowe and Mr. Fowler had both said nothing could be worse for Mrs. Forbes than not having her luncheon at a proper hour in the middle of the day; and all owing, as Colonel Forbes said to himself, to Jane's absurdity in not saying what she wished.

In his own eyes Colonel Forbes was the most injured of men. Jane's illness was the result of her own imprudence; his domestic comfort was sacrificed because she would not take care of herself. He could not make up his mind to sit with her, and read to her, he felt so annoyed; and therefore he shut himself up in his study with a novel, and begged that the children might be kept from playing in the hall because he was not well, and could not bear a noise. He really was not at all well when evening came; for he wanted exercise, and because he had not taken it, he had a bad headache. Then he went to Jane, and she pitied him, and made him sit down by her sofa, and put eau de Cologne to his forehead; and as she was looking better by that time he did not feel as much irritated as he had done, and had therefore the pleasant consciousness

of acting a magnanimous part in forgiving her. Jane would have been glad to have the children with her a little before they went to bed ; but Colonel Forbes thought his head would not bear it, and he could not go to his study, for he had been alone all day ; but he liked the idea of reading aloud, and chose a new pamphlet containing some remarkable statistics. When he was tired of reading, he recommended Jane to go to bed, and went to his study to write some notes from the statistical pamphlet.—“I am afraid Master’s reading has tired you, Ma’am,” said Dawson, as she came to attend Jane. “A little, perhaps,” replied Jane, smiling ; “it is difficult to keep up the attention when one is not quite strong.” Dawson made no more observations ; she saw that Mrs. Forbes had had enough talking and thinking for that evening.

CHAPTER XLVIII.

JOHN ASHTON did not go to see Colonel Forbes, although Katharine carefully delivered the message. He should be engaged all day—that was his excuse, but Katharine fancied he did not seem thoroughly well pleased with the communication, though in words it implied that his wish, whatever it might be, was to be gratified. Katharine thought less about the matter than she might have done, from finding, on her return home, that her mother was not as well as usual. For some time past Mrs. Ashton had adopted invalid habits, did not get up till late, and never went out except when it was warm and dry, and then only for a short walk ; but the change had been very gradual, Katharine herself had scarcely noticed it. This day, however,

she found her mother looking pale and worn, and speaking in an irritable tone, which was quite unlike her natural disposition. Lately, especially, Mrs. Ashton had been particularly pleased and contented, except when anxieties for John were forced upon her. Katharine could scarcely help feeling angry when she found that Selina had been pouring a tale of complaints into her mother's ears, telling her a number of annoying things, which Katharine had been trying to keep from her. One of the farm servants had been detected in petty thefts, and a favourite cow had died, and the best cart-horse was lamed by the carelessness of a carter; and all these and many other grievances had been narrated by Selina to poor Mrs. Ashton, as they sat at work together, principally, as Selina said in excuse to Katharine, to give her some amusement, but not a little, Katharine believed herself, to excite her compassion, since the conversation had ended with a request for some money. It had been granted, of course, and this Mrs. Ashton had to confess, and she felt guilty, for the sum was large, and her yearly income from the shop was still in arrears; but she never now looked beyond the moment, or considered that she might be giving to John what fairly ought to be considered as due to Katharine. Within the last few months, indeed, she had adopted a notion which gave her quite a new interest in her property. Although John had already taken so large a share, she could not give up the wish that he and Katharine should share all that remained; and whenever any uncomfortable misgiving troubled her as to what she was doing in advancing money so largely, she was accustomed to comfort herself, by thinking that it was only forestalling what would be poor John's own in a short time, and that it was better to let him have it

now that he really wanted it. The idea had never been exactly propounded openly till this day, but when Mrs. Ashton saw the grave face with which, in spite of all Katharine's efforts to the contrary, the communication that fifteen pounds had just been promised to Selina, was received, she could not help bringing it forward as an excuse. "You know, Kitty," she said in a tremulous voice, as Katharine sat down on the window seat and tried to conceal her annoyance, by taking up the false stitches in her mother's knitting, "you know it's only doing with John as your poor father did. He always helped him when things were very pressing, and my belief is that matters couldn't have gone on if he had not."—Katharine saw in a moment what was implied in this remark, and she could not help feeling, that her interests were but little considered in comparison with her brother's. But what could be said? How could she bring forward her advantage in opposition to his?—"The fact is," continued Mrs. Ashton, in the same nervous manner, when she found that Katharine made no answer to her observation, "I have been considering a good deal about all our concerns lately, and I can't help thinking, my dear, that it must be hard for poor John to feel that he is to have little or nothing from me when he is so badly off. I know it was your dear father's notion, that John had had most of his share of the property from the money that was laid out upon the farm and the stock, and that the rest might be for you. But no one can tell how things will turn out, and times have been very hard lately, and you know he has to take care of Selina and the little ones; and so I think it might be more right to make it share and share alike; and then there can be no unpleasant

feeling between you. There is nothing so bad as family disputes about money matters."

So very true this was, that Katharine herself was for a moment puzzled by it, to the extent of thinking she must have been very selfish in her view of the matter. "I wish, dear mother, you would do what you like and think best," she said; "I had rather not talk about it, a great deal." — "That's very good-natured of you, Kate, and very like you; as I was saying to John only yesterday, there's no one ever thinks less of herself than you; and you know, my dear, it will, in fact, be helping to make your home more comfortable; for, of course, John and Selina will always be glad to have you with them."

A vision crossed Katharine's mind of a home of her own. It had come often of late, when the fact of her mother's increasing weakness forced itself upon her; but she would not encourage it now, for it might be her duty for the children's sake to remain with her brother, and to live by herself would be very sad and lonely. True, there was another alternative, but that involved a thought more dangerous to her peace of mind, and Katharine kept such strict guard over herself that it was stifled before it arose. Yet she was much perplexed what to say to her mother. Mrs. Ashton evidently expected some reply, which would satisfy her that no objection could be raised to her plan, and Katharine would willingly have given it if possible, but there was a most unfortunate sense of justice in the way, and she could only hurriedly kiss her mother, and beg her not to trouble herself about such things now; no doubt, whatever was settled, all would be right in the end. But Mrs. Ashton was not satisfied, for her conscience was not at rest. She was a very bad reckoner, but she

could not avoid a suspicion that the "share and share alike," which was to contribute so largely to the family concord, would, at the same time, diminish Katharine's little fortune in a way which she had never been led to expect. She began to apologise more nervously—in fact, a little angrily. "Of course," she said, "no one can imagine I have any feeling of favour in the case. With only two children I must have the same care for both, but that's what I don't think you feel, Kate; you always were inclined to be jealous, from a baby." Poor Katharine! If this were so, the feeling had been grievously tried and the fault severely punished; but she did not know that she was jealous, she had always thought that she loved John too well not to wish him to be first with every one. Still, she might be mistaken, and she would not contradict her mother. Mrs. Ashton continued, "My father used to say, Kate, 'What's the use of a woman's being rich?' and there's a good deal in it. When a woman's got money, she's never safe from a parcel of needy suitors, who come after her just for the sake of the gold and nothing else, and ten to one she marries a good-for-nothing fellow, who makes her miserable. If she has enough to live comfortably, that is all she can require; and you know, Kate, there can be no doubt of your having that always with John and Selina." A home, certainly, Katharine felt she might hope for; the comfort was another question. She resolved to be bold, though it might be for her own interest. "Mother, dear," she said, "you won't mind my telling you what I think, will you? I am sure I would not be unkind to John for the world, and if there was enough for us both to share alike, I should only be too glad. I don't in the least care about being rich myself, and I should be delighted to think he would have

enough to make him easy in his mind; but I should not like to feel dependent upon him or any one; and I don't think it would do for us to feel that we must always live together. I think it would fret Selina, and that would make John unhappy. As long as they like me to be with them, it will be all very well, but a hundred changes may come to alter their notions and mine too; and if anything were to happen to John, I am nearly sure Selina would rather be alone, or with her own family; and all this together makes me feel that I should like to have enough to keep myself if I were obliged to live separate. I think," she added, after a little consideration, "that eighty pounds a year would be sufficient, and if I might have that quite secure, I should not trouble about anything else."—"Well, to be sure—yes, certainly; eighty pounds a year, let me see;" and Mrs. Ashton began to calculate, but very soon became puzzled. "Considering what has been advanced to John already," said Katharine still more boldly, "there would not be as much as this if our shares were equal; at least, unless the shop should pay a great deal better than it has begun, and then what I am to have from it would only last for five years." Mrs. Ashton could not at all take this in; she kept on saying "Eighty pounds a year; oh, yes, my Kitty; of course you must have eighty pounds a year;" but where it was to come from was beyond her powers of calculation. Her face became more worn in its expressions, her forehead especially was marked with deep troubled lines. Katharine felt very vexed that the unhappy subject had been brought forward, but how could she prevent it? And then it had only seemed right to state plainly what might be so very essential to herself, and ultimately even to John; for injustice, as she well knew, is sure, in

some form or other, to work evil for all concerned in it. "We will leave it now, dear mother, and talk it over another time," she said, trying to divert her mother's mind; "there is no need to settle anything about it at all now, and I didn't say what I did because I cared about it, only because it seemed the fitting opportunity. Please don't look so very worried, I can't bear to see it."—"Eighty pounds a year; surely there will be eighty pounds a year," repeated Mrs. Ashton, trying to reckon upon her fingers, and not taking any notice of Katharine's caresses. "Please, please, leave it; please don't think about it, dear mother, please not," continued Katharine, alarmed at her mother's fixed gaze. "Stop, child; where's John? Fifteen hundred and the shop. Where's John? Oh! my head!" and Mrs. Ashton fell from her chair, struck by paralysis.

CHAPTER XLIX.

KATHARINE had gone through many trials, but none were worse than this. True she had expected it. Mr. Fowler had told her long before that her mother's failing powers might probably in this way come to a sudden end, but the one thought continually before her was, that she herself had at least been the immediate cause. If she had only allowed her mother's mind to have rest, she might, at a better opportunity, have said all that was necessary without any such terrible result. It was a most goading thought; there were moments when it worked Katharine's mind almost to desperation. Even when she was most calm in manner, it was

always present with her. Her steady judgment became disturbed, and regardless of health, she found her only rest in exertions so great and unremitting that under a less pressure of excited feeling she would have been utterly incapable of them.

They were fearful days which she spent at that time—days when her mother's life seemed to hang upon a thread—when human aid could avail nothing, and her trust in Higher Help was checked by the remorseful reproaches of an over-sensitive conscience. Often and often in the silence of midnight Katharine knelt by Mrs. Ashton's bed-side, unable to utter words, but finding her only rest in the attitude of prayer; and many and most fervent were the petitions which ascended to Heaven that her mother might be spared, if but for this time, that her child might prove by the devotion of every moment of her time, and the sacrifice of every other wish of her heart, how entire was her repentance and her love.

And the prayer was in a measure heard, and Mrs. Ashton rose up from her sick bed, the wreck of what she had been, with one side entirely paralysed, and her speech imperfect, yet in the possession of her other faculties, except at intervals, when she showed traces of her illness by the imperfection of her memory. The one thought now at Moorlands was to make her comfortable; even Selina's selfishness was touched by her helpless state, and now that Mrs. Ashton could no longer interfere in the household affairs, she was willing to do all which she considered lay in her power to render her latter days easy. 'The all was indeed very little. It included only a kiss, morning and evening, a gossiping half-hour's chat after an afternoon spent in Rilworth, and a little reading aloud when she had nothing else to do. Beyond this Selina did not feel herself called

upon to make sacrifices. She would never stay at home to give Katharine an opportunity of going out, even for a walk, unless it happened to suit her inclinations, and she never would deny herself the pleasure of giving a party, though the visitors were likely to be noisy, and Mrs. Ashton might be disturbed by them. Her taste for gaiety was growing stronger than ever, and a most expensive taste Katharine could not help seeing it was. No wonder that her bills were so high as to oblige her to take money which had been promised elsewhere, and to apply to her mother-in-law for assistance, when every whim of the moment was gratified at whatever cost, and John, who knew nothing about women's dress, and always supposed that gowns were to be had for about ten shillings apiece, encouraged her extravagance because he liked to see her look handsome.

Katharine was tolerably indifferent to all this. She had long known Selina's character, and could not now be disappointed in it; and indeed she had not the heart to think about her, or about any one but her mother. Even Jane was only occasionally a cause of anxiety when perhaps a note would arrive saying that she did not feel any material benefit from the advice of her London doctor. John was the only person who really helped Katharine, and he certainly did a great deal, for his feelings were quick and he was very fond of his mother. He would often come in from his work and sit down by Mrs. Ashton's arm-chair, and arrange her cushions as tenderly as if she had been a little infant, and then in a softened voice inquire what else he could do for her, and tell her any little thing he fancied could interest her. But to watch all this gave Katharine a pang even in the midst of her satisfaction; for she felt then how much there was in him which might have been turned to good if only he had fallen into good

hands. But the marriage had been his deliberate choice, and the consequences must rest upon his own head.

He was not happy; Katharine could see that evidently, independently of his anxiety for his mother.

There seemed to be something working in his mind, about which he was unwilling to speak. Private letters came to him frequently, and some of them, Katharine fancied, were in Colonel Forbes' handwriting. Katharine was vexed with herself for feeling so distrustful, whenever this was the case. It seemed an injustice to Jane, and there really was no obvious cause for it. Colonel Forbes had always been a most honourable person in all his dealings. He had been hard, perhaps, with John, and Katharine was sure he did not like him; but he had kept strictly to the letter of his agreement, however much his own inclination might have been opposed to it. It was the secrecy which Katharine dreaded and disliked. John, with all his faults, had hitherto been so open, that she always satisfied herself with feeling that she knew the worst of everything which was to be known. She could not do that now; and when John sat talking to his mother, Katharine could not help watching him, and listening to him, not from any particular interest in what he was saying, but merely with the painful wish to discover, by some chance word or intimation, what was lurking in the depths of his mind.

It was a monotonous life which Katharine led in this way for several weeks, and there was no change to be anticipated, but that which would make her still more lonely. Her Rilworth friends sometimes came over to see her, but their visits could not be much comfort, because Mrs. Ashton did not like strangers about her, and Katharine could not there-

fore be with them for any length of time. The Miss Lockes asked her to go and stay with them, for a little change, but that Katharine was obliged to decline, though John urged it strongly, and even made Selina promise that she would take her place as nurse. Katharine knew too well what Selina's promises were worth to heed them, and she would not even have the subject mentioned to her mother. Still it was a pleasure to feel that John could think for and be anxious about her; and she went on more cheerfully with her work in consequence. About five weeks after Mrs. Ashton had first been taken ill, Katharine was, however, obliged to go into Rilworth, on a little business for her mother, which no one but herself could well settle. Mrs. Ashton was unwilling to part with her even for that short time, but she happened to be feeling particularly well that day, and Katharine was to go in late, and return early. John proposed to drive her in and out, for he had business in Rilworth, and she was to have luncheon with Mrs. Reeves, so that she would have a little pleasure besides the business.

The change from the sick room to the open air and the bright clear sky, the sight of faces not clouded with care, and the sounds of the active business of life, were all cheering and invigorating. Katharine did not feel in good spirits,—that was impossible—but she seemed to breathe more freely. She was conscious that she had not yet lost the elasticity of mind which had hitherto given her such a keen power of enjoyment, and this discovery is a great help to all who make it. No trial is crushing, so long as we feel that ever so slightly our hearts rebound from its pressure. It is only as life goes on, and youth and hope are deadened, that we become as calmly acquiescent in

joy as in sorrow ; and even then, some minds—and Katharine's was of this cast—have aspring of vigour and a power of happiness which, after years of trial, will enable them to rise, as it were, instantaneously, as soon as the least relief is given. Such persons are very pleasant to themselves, as well as to others. Katharine felt as if she had recovered confidence in herself when she found how enjoyable that little drive was, and that she could look forward with real pleasure, and not mere comfort, to the luncheon with Mr. Reeves, and the little talk with Betsy Carter about Rilworth matters. She had but a short time allowed her, for John was to call for her again at four o'clock ; but she had mapped it out most ingeniously, to take in a great deal of business, including two visits in her old district, and a few words with the Miss Ronaldsons. "Half-past twelve! So we go to Mr. Carter's first, I suppose, Kate," said John, as they stopped at the Rilworth turnpike. "Yes, that will be best ; it will be nearest, and I must have a little talk with Betsy about my mother's business. Where are you going, John?" His face became a little overcast, and he answered shortly, "A good many ways,—to the shop for one."—"Ah! the shop!" said Katharine, with a sigh, which, however, was not very mournful ; "how I wish we could cut the shop!"—"We need not trouble ourselves to do that," replied John ; "it will cut us before long. Henry Madden is such a fool!" Katharine was in a manner recalled from a pleasant dream ; but she answered cheerfully, "If it is to be so, don't you think we might do well to take some steps before it comes to the point of cutting?"—"Well, perhaps so," replied John ; "only one does not see how it is to be done. Madden has no more ready money than I have ; in fact, Kate, I don't think ready money is much the go in England just now, with any

one.”—“Where is it ever the go? as you call it,” asked Katharine.—“The colonies—Australia—there’s the place,” said John. “I know three fellows at this moment, who went out with only fifty pounds in their pockets, and by this time have made as many hundreds.”—“They may have gone out alone,” said Katharine; “that makes a great difference. But, however, I don’t mean to say that there is not a much greater opening in Australia than in England.”—“Only you would not go, if you were in my place, I suppose,” said John. He spoke as if his whole heart were in the question. Katharine was much struck with his manner; it opened to her the idea of a more fixed and deliberate plan than she had ever imagined. “I don’t know,” she replied; “I can’t tell what might be right under some circumstances.” John bit the top of his driving whip, and said no more till they reached Mr. Carter’s house.

“We meet here again at four o’clock then,” were his parting words, as he drove off, and Katharine promised to be ready. Katharine was shown into a room upstairs, which sometimes was let; a drawing-room prettily furnished, with a few pictures, and some good old-fashioned books. When there were no lodgers in the house, Miss Carter used this as her sitting-room principally, so she said, to air it. She could never be quite free from pretence, at least in manner, and Katharine always felt as if she had a little something disagreeable to get over when first they met; but Betsy really was sincerely kind, and helped Katharine in a good many difficulties, and gratitude and old acquaintance combined made Katharine willing to bear a great deal. On the present occasion she was contented to be kissed, and told in a drawling voice that she looked charmingly well; and she answered properly all the inquiries after her poor dear mother,

and when she had last heard from London, which was Miss Carter's way of implying that she knew Katharine and Mrs. Forbes to be on terms of the greatest intimacy,—and then they proceeded to business. The point under discussion related to the exchange of some old furniture, which Miss Carter had been negotiating for Mrs. Ashton; nothing very important or very interesting, though useful and necessary. It was soon transacted between two straightforward, honest-minded, energetic people, and an engagement was made that Katharine should go with Miss Carter to see the person who was to take it before she left Rilworth; and then, very naturally, Miss Carter proceeded to impart the latest news of the town.

“Mr. George Andrews is going to be married, my dear, have you heard that?” was the first piece of what she called astounding information. Katharine laughed, and said she did not know why it should be so very astounding, the wonder was that he had not been married before. — “Perhaps so, my dear; but it is the case of the *Æsopian* fable of crying ‘wolf,’ too often. You remember that beautiful fable, no doubt. Everybody has said for the last five years that Mr. George Andrews ought to marry.” — “And I am sure there were wives enough provided for him,” observed Katharine; “Miss Susan Lane, and Miss Madden, and that pretty cousin of Selina's.” — “Ah! my dear, yes; but the fact is, there were always difficulties. Some were too aristocratic, and some too plebeian. I always said myself that George Andrews would never be contented with a Rilworth lady, and so he has proved.” — “Well!” said Katharine, “I wish you would tell me who the lady is, for I really am curious to know.” — “Are you indeed? I call that quite good of you to acknowledge. I believed you

were far above such sublunary interests.”—“Not in the least,” exclaimed Katharine; “nothing amuses me more than to hear all about whom people are going to marry; only please, Betsy, be quick, for it wants only five minutes to one, and Mrs. Reeves lunches at one.”—“Oh! you are going there, are you? I could quarrel with you, for I thought you were come expressly to see me. But dear Mrs. Reeves! I can’t refuse you to her, she really is so good; and Mr. Reeves too, he did preach such a beautiful sermon on Sunday; I quite wished some friends I know who find fault with him had been there to hear it.”—“I dare say,” said Katharine quickly; “but please, Betsy, leave Mr. Reeves, and just tell me who is to be Mrs. George Andrews, and then I must run away.”—“It is such a long story,” said Miss Carter, deliberately. —“Then cut it short,” said Katharine, “what is the name?”—“Jenkins. That does not help you, my dear.”—“Not in the least,” replied Katharine; “I don’t think I ever was acquainted with a Jenkins in my life.”—“And these are quite new people,” continued Miss Carter, “strangers entirely; you could not possibly have heard of them, at least till within the last week. The father is at the head of a great Australian Land Company, or something of that kind, I don’t know exactly the term by which it is designated. The rumour is he is sent down by Colonel Forbes.”—“Oh!” was all Katharine’s reply. She was engrossed by a faint, dull, glimmering, disagreeable light, which the connection of Colonel Forbes’ name and an Australian Land Company had thrown upon John’s words and manner. “You see,” continued Miss Carter, “there is a great desire now to people those distant regions of the earth. No doubt we have a large surplus population in Great Britain,

and"——"Yes, yes," interrupted Katharine, not quite catching the meaning of the words, "but it must have been very quick work."—"Most rapid," replied Miss Carter, drawing up her head sideways as she always did preparatory to giving out any peculiarly learned piece of information, "I was reading yesterday evening a paper upon the last census; it is said that the rate"——"Of Mr. George Andrews' courtship was what?" asked Katharine, laughing. "I beg your pardon, Betsy, but I don't care in the least about the census, and I do care a great deal to know if Mr. George Andrews fell in love after a week's acquaintance."—"Katharine, my love, you are too volatile,—too much so a great deal for your age. I heard it remarked the other day, that you looked as if nothing would ever keep down your spirits; and it gives an unfavourable impression. I don't speak for yourself so much as for Mr. Reeves. It is well known that you are one of his followers."—"Never, Betsy," exclaimed Katharine, "I never was anybody's follower, and never mean to be; but we won't enter upon that old discussion now; only just tell me how did he manage it."—"Now, really, Katharine, how can I tell? you should not ask such questions; you really are too bad."—"I thought you liked questions in natural history," said Katharine; "and you know the old joke against George Andrews is that he would never catch a wife, because he was like that great creature,—the alligator, is it not?—so long in turning round to look at her."—"As for that," replied Miss Carter, a little flattered by this reference to her knowledge of natural history, "I believe the fact is they have been acquainted for months, only he has kept it very close, and she being away, it was not likely to get wind."—"Then has Mr. George Andrews anything to do with this great

Australian Land Company?" asked Katharine. — "Why that is not precisely known," replied Miss Carter, mysteriously. "The fact is, there are a good many reports—what the French call *on dits*, about it. Some say the company is set up by Colonel Forbes, and that he is to make his fortune out of it, of which there seems little enough need, as he has such a large one already; but there is nothing like the love of money—most ensnaring it is."—"Rumours are they?" interrupted Katharine. "I don't put much faith in rumours; I would rather hear about Miss Jenkins. What is she like?"—"Light hair, rather sandy; grey eyes a little staring; a good long nose, and very white teeth, only the mouth too wide; fine figure, tall, decidedly aristocratic; altogether likely to be an addition to the Rilworth society, and so far very satisfactory," said Miss Carter.—"I hope she will make herself useful," observed Katharine, "that is the main point. And her father, you say, is very rich, and the head of the Australian Land Company."—"What he is or is not, my dear, nobody exactly seems able to tell, though he has been the talk of Rilworth for the last six days. He is staying at Mr. Andrews', that I know for certain; and all the young men are wild to buy land and make their fortunes, Henry Madden among them." Katharine could not be accused of being too volatile now, she looked quite thoughtful enough to satisfy even Miss Carter's notion of what was becoming in one of Mr. Reeves' followers; but she did not betray her thoughts, and only replied in one of those oracular sentences which are such invaluable helps in conversational emergencies—"Well! strange times we live in! Good-bye, Betsy, I will try and be back by a quarter-past two."

CHAPTER L.

KATHARINE went to Mr. Reeves' and had a pleasant hour's conversation, not perhaps quite as amusing as that with Miss Carter, but which sent her back to the duties of life strengthened for whatever might be required of her. That was the great blessing of Mr. Reeves' advice, it was so simply practical. Katharine always felt that he put before her not what might be done under different circumstances, but what she could herself do under her own. And if there was anything abrupt in his manner, or occasionally chilling, it was in a great measure made up to her by Mrs. Reeves' warmth. They talked a good deal about Moorlands, and not a little about Maplestead. Katharine had not heard from Jane lately, but Mr. Reeves had received a note from Colonel Forbes that morning, and it had made him rather uneasy. Mrs. Forbes was not quite so well, she had been over-exerting herself, and it had brought on one of her old attacks of faintness, but Colonel Forbes hoped that a little quiet would soon restore her again. "She ought never to have gone to London to put herself in the way of excitement," was Mr. Reeves' comment.—"To be put, my dear, you mean," said Mrs. Reeves; and Katharine, though pained at the news, could not help smiling at the difference in their quickness of perception as to the state of affairs at Maplestead. "We shall have the Colonel down again before long," said Mr. Reeves; "at least so says the noted Mr. Jenkins, the agent for the great Australian Land Company. I suppose, Katharine, you have heard of Mr. Jenkins."—"Seeing is better than hearing sometimes," said Mrs. Reeves. "Look, Katharine, he is coming up the street now, that tall

man, with the bushy red whiskers.”—“Walking with George Andrews and young Madden, and your brother, is he not?” asked Mr. Reeves, as the party stopped just opposite the window. Katharine looked. John was there, listening deferentially to Mr. Jenkins, who was laying down the law to the great edification apparently of his admiring friends. “The first time I have seen anything like a friendly spirit between Madden and George Andrews since the days of the famous Union Ball,” said Mr. Reeves; “but worldly interests will work wonders. It rather disheartens one when one feels the difficulty of creating a fellow feeling upon other subjects.”—“I don’t quite see what the worldly interest is to be in this case,” said Mrs. Reeves. “What benefit can Mr. Andrews derive from the Australian Land Company?”—“I may suspect,” said Mr. Reeves; “but I am not going to tell, for the chances are I may be wrong; but, Katharine, don’t let your brother be carried away by the mania, unless you are thoroughly sure it is a safe one.”—“If Colonel Forbes approves, there can scarcely be any great danger as far as the stability of the company is concerned,” said Katharine. “He is not a man to be taken in.”—“First see that Colonel Forbes does approve,” replied Mr. Reeves; “I can’t make that out for certain yet, in spite of Mr. Jenkins’ asseverations.”—“He will carry his point if assertions are of any avail,” said Mrs. Reeves, who had been standing silent by the window. “I am convinced he has gained some victory now over your brother, Katharine.” Katharine had been watching also from a kind of basilisk fascination, which made her keep her eyes fixed upon the little party. It was as though she were seeing a spell tried upon her brother, which should bring him into a charmed circle, from which he could not escape. “George

Andrews talks well," said Mr. Reeves. — "And John cannot talk at all," observed Katharine, very gravely. Mrs. Reeves turned quickly towards her, struck by the change in her voice. "You are afraid of something, Katharine?" she said. — "Am I?" replied Katharine, looking up brightly; and, after a moment's consideration, she added, "Yes, I am afraid. When people join together only from self-interest how can one help it?" — "The old story," said Mr. Reeves. "Happily the merciful Providence of God overrules self-interest for lasting good." — "Lasting good for the whole, sir," replied Katharine; "but individuals suffer." — "Suffer, because it is good they should suffer, because without suffering, their case would be far worse. But we will not talk in this way, Katharine, merely because Mr. George Andrews is holding forth oracularly to your brother; that would be raising a mountain out of a mole-hill." — "Only straws show which way the current flows," said Katharine. "I dread that Australian current for my mother's sake." — "Then let your mind rest," said Mr. Reeves, cheerfully. "I believe there is a special Providence over the old even as over infants." — "And they are taken away from the evil to come," replied Katharine. There was a pause. Presently Mr. Reeves said, "You will not forget, Katharine, what we have often talked about, the comfort of reading the book of the past when we are tempted to tremble for the future." — "I will try not," was Katharine's answer, spoken with a glistening eye, for her heart was full with the thought of that grievous loss for herself, which yet, it might be, would be the greatest blessing she could desire for her mother.

The business with Betsy Carter was despatched, he visits in the district were paid, and about half-past three o'clock, Katharine knocked at Miss Ronald-

son's door, and was admitted by Deborah, with the exclamation, "Oh! Miss Ashton, is that you? Well I am glad to be sure! the ladies are quite ailing and down-hearted for want of a visitor."—"Nothing particular the matter, I hope," said Katharine, as she followed Deborah through the long passage.—"Nothing to be called that, Miss Ashton," replied Deborah, talking as she went on; "but they've had a good deal of care lately. I dare say they'll tell you all about it. Mr. Charles——" They were standing at the parlour-door, and the remainder of the sentence about Mr. Charles was lost. Katharine was perhaps a little absent in manner in consequence, but the good old ladies were too delighted to see her to notice it. Miss Ronaldson was feeling very weak from the effects of an attack of influenza, and Miss Priscilla had forgotten both temper and rheumatism in the anxiety to nurse her. It was a very different kind of nursing from her sister's. There was no entreating, or lamenting; no doubt as to whether what ought to be done would be done. Decided authority on one side, placid, willing submission on the other, made everything go smoothly. And so, when Katharine entered the room, Miss Priscilla whispered a warning to her sister, "Now don't distress yourself, my dear, keep quiet; it's only Katharine Ashton. Keep quiet and she'll come and speak to you," and then she went forward to Katharine with a certain air of dignified graciousness, which seemed to have grown upon her since her authority had been undisputed. "You find me a very poor creature, my dear Katharine," said Miss Ronaldson, holding Katharine's hand, "a very poor creature indeed; but so it is, nearly seventy years—" "Seventy your next birthday, my dear," said Miss Priscilla. "Ah! to be sure, Prissy, my dear, seventy my next

birthday. It's a good age, Katharine."—"It is indeed," said Katharine, "and I am afraid a good deal of trouble of one kind and another comes with it."—"Ah! my dear, yes, but it would be very wrong in me to complain; with a comfortable home, and kind friends, and a dear good nurse. No, I always think there's something to be enjoyed as long as God thinks fit to keep us here. There mayn't be enough to satisfy some people, but there's a taste I am sure for all, and a good large one for me; and so I thank Him for it;" and the wrinkled hands were clasped together reverently and fervently. "And Rebecca has been a good deal better, till just lately," continued Miss Priscilla; "those drops—Davys's drops,—did her a quantity of good. She has left them off now for about a month or three weeks, but I shall give her some again soon, if I find she does not get on as she ought."—"They were strong drops, my dear," said Miss Ronaldson; "I thought too strong; but Prissy said not, and so I took them, and to be sure they did me a power of good; and now I have given some to Charlie, for he has been ill."—"Very ill!" said Miss Priscilla; "with a terrible fever, so Mrs. Ronaldson writes us word."—"And he's very weak still, poor fellow," continued Miss Ronaldson; "and no one to nurse him but his mother, and she nearly worn out."—"Ah! you were always a capital nurse, I've heard say, Katharine, my dear."—Katharine, in spite of her uneasiness, could scarcely refrain from a smile at the simple way in which Miss Ronaldson betrayed the connection of her ideas. "I hope Mr. Ronaldson is better now," she said, trying not to show that she had any interest in the question beyond that of ordinary kindness.—"Well! he is better, my dear," replied Miss Priscilla; "he has begun to mend ever since he took to Davys's drops,

which is now just a fortnight ago ; but he has had a hard struggle, I'll assure you."—"And no one to nurse him!" again repeated Miss Ronaldson.—"Hush! sister, remember!" Miss Priscilla's warning finger was held up as in the olden time, and Miss Ronaldson sank back, obedient, in her chair. "He has done very well in the way of nursing, my dear; he has had his mother to nurse him,—and that's as much as a young man ought to need. After all, it's my belief that a mother's love is more sure than a wife's; and so I have told him, and warned him that he ought to be thankful he has such a mother."—"And we may hope he is, my dear," interrupted Miss Ronaldson. "You see, Katharine, a time of illness like that is a great trial for a young man. It brings him out and shows what he is; not that any one could ever have had any doubt of Charlie who ever knew him. He's been good from a boy, and when he was ill, my sister writes me word, it was wonderful how he thought of every one; leaving messages, because he thought he was going to die—no one forgotten; all his Rilworth friends remembered—Mr. Reeves, and your brother;—and keepsakes."—"Sister!" Miss Priscilla's voice was really terrific.—"To be sure, Prissy, you are quite right. I was very wrong in what I was going to say, but Katharine won't think about it now, because you see the book has never been sent."—"Sister! sister! indeed, Katharine, I beg you won't think—indeed, sister, you are very wrong!" Miss Priscilla's agitation was so great that she took out her handkerchief and began to walk up and down the room fanning herself. What Katharine felt was not betrayed except by the paleness of her cheek; but Miss Ronaldson's distress was not to be calmed.—"Yes, she knew," she said, "she had done very

wrong. The book was not to have been mentioned, and she had never thought of mentioning it, only it slipped out. "Not that it ought to have slipped out, Prissy, my dear," she added; "of course it ought not; of course, Katharine, if it had been Prissy, she never would have said it; but it always was my way to let out things; and you know it isn't so much to be wondered at. Pray, Prissy, sit down, you will be sure to catch the rheumatism by that open window, and then what will become of us? Oh, dear! oh, dear!" Miss Priscilla withdrew majestically from the window.—"Miss Priscilla, ma'am, could you be good enough to step into the kitchen?" said Deborah, putting her head in at the doorway.—"Coming, Deborah, my good girl; leave us for the moment"—and, Deborah, retired. "Sister!" said Miss Priscilla, advancing towards the centre of the room, "I have but one more warning to give—let bygones be bygones. Katharine, I shall see you on my return." With a slow and stately step Miss Priscilla left the room, leaving the awe of her presence behind her.—Miss Ronaldson beckoned Katharine to take the chair next her. "She is right, my dear—Prissy is always right, it shouldn't have been said; but 'twas natural, poor fellow! when he was so very ill, thinking he was dying! And a book of prayers, too!—the book he always used. Just like him that was; so very good! Oh, Katharine, if you could but have said yes! But, dear me"—and Miss Ronaldson looked rather nervously at the door—"what am I thinking of? what will Prissy say? Prissy is quite right, my dear—let bygones be bygones; and we will talk of something else. How has your poor mother been lately?"—"Not quite so well, thank you," was the reply. A simple, straightforward answer, but the tone was so peculiar that Miss Ronaldson

turned herself round as quickly as her weakness would allow, and gazed at Katharine's death-like face in alarm.—“Why! what?—I declare, oh dear, what will become of us? Prissy, my dear! Prissy! Deborah! some water. Oh me! oh me! she's quite gone.” A violent pull at the bell-rope brought Miss Priscilla and Deborah into the room much more quickly than poor Miss Ronaldson's faint cries for help. Katharine was laid upon the sofa, not quite insensible, but very nearly so, whilst Miss Priscilla, half anxious and half excited, applied salts, and hartshorn, and sal volatile, and ordered all the windows to be opened, and sent for the great Indian fan in the left-hand corner of the upper division of the chestnut-bureau,—and, in fact, did all that she had ever heard as having been prescribed or imagined for the recovery of persons in what Deborah insisted upon calling “a dead faint.” Miss Ronaldson looked on guilty, and most uneasy. Was there any connection between the conversation and the fainting fit?—What had she said?—Was it necessary to confess to Priscilla?—What was there to confess? After all, might it not be the heat?—but then, to be sure, it was not hot; or the walk?—but then Katharine had been seen driving in with her brother in the chaise. Deborah suggested the most natural solution of the problem, and Miss Ronaldson's uneasy conscience caught at it eagerly.—“To be sure,” said Deborah, “she has been overworking herself with nursing her mother. People who have gone over to Moorlands have said Miss Ashton was looking very ill, and sure enough 'twas time. Poor thing! Poor thing! how she must have fagged!”

There was some truth in Deborah's conjecture. Katharine was overworked. She was not in a state to bear much excitement, and the day had in one

way and another brought a good deal. Perhaps the very fact of the enjoyment she had felt on first leaving Moorlands had brought on a reaction; at any rate it was better to think this than to suppose herself guilty of a weak loss of self-command; and upon fully recovering her recollection, she eagerly seized upon the assurance which was made her that she had looked very ill when she came in, and her friends were certain that she had worn herself out with nursing. "It's very clear, to be sure," said Miss Ronaldson, greatly relieved at the turn which public conjecture was taking; "to be sure! it's what all young people do. There's no keeping them within bounds. I have often known Prissy work till she was quite ill; but then Prissy always was a worker. Take a little more wine, my dear, or a little brandy—just a teaspoonful."—"She will have some arrow-root, sister," said Miss Priscilla. "Deborah! a tea-cup of arrow-root, with a teaspoonful of brandy in it, directly." Katharine sat up and caught Miss Priscilla's hand,—“Stop, Deborah! please—indeed, Miss Priscilla, I have had my luncheon—my dinner it was,—at Mr. Reeves'. I could not possibly take it.”—"Some arrow-root, Deborah, made very clear, with two teaspoonfuls of brandy in it," repeated Miss Priscilla. "Katharine, my dear, lie down. Sister, you can spare her one of your pillows; this sofa-cushion is very hard." Miss Ronaldson would have given up all in an instant; she even suggested whether Katharine had not better go to bed, and she could lie there and sleep most comfortably for the next two hours. It was like listening to a proposal for being buried alive, and Katharine started up and put her feet to the ground; but resistance to Miss Priscilla was quite useless. A gentle push, which Katharine was not just then at all able to stand against, forced

her head to sink back upon the sofa, and her two feet were taken up, as if they did not in the least belong to her, and Miss Priscilla then seated herself at the further end of the sofa, and laid her hand upon them, to be quite sure they should not again escape her. Katharine laughed in spite of herself. She was feeling very dizzy and weak, and there was an aching, unresting sense of something painful at her heart, which she could scarcely recall;—yet she laughed, and Miss Priscilla said “hush!” in a warning voice, and Miss Ronaldson entreated her not to let her spirits get the better of her.

Deborah came to the door. “Miss Ashton ready for her arrow-root, ma’am? It’s beautiful clear and hot!”—“Bring it in, Deborah, and put it on the round-table, and fetch some tea-biscuits.” Katharine was in despair. She was not fond of arrow-root in her days of strongest health. She took out her watch: “Four o’clock, I declare. It really is so dreadfully late, I must go;—if you would please let me. I am afraid I could not touch the arrow-root, though you are so very good in getting it for me.”—“Mr. John’s chaise puts up at the ‘Bear,’” said Miss Priscilla. “Deborah, put your bonnet on, and run down street to the Bear, and tell the hostler that Mr. John Ashton is to call here for his sister. Make haste, there’s a good girl. Now, Katharine!”—Katharine’s feet were set free, and Miss Priscilla went to fetch the little round-table, and placed it by the sofa.—“Davys’s drops,—what do you say to them, Prissy?” said Miss Ronaldson. “Don’t you think they would do her good?”—“Not to-day, sister. She shall take a bottle home with her, and try them to-morrow.” There is an indescribably helpless feeling in being thus talked of as a third person, as if one had lost all power of judging for oneself; and Katharine, who was not at all in the habit of fainting, and

whose head was still in anything but a clear state, was quite unable to contend against the pressure of circumstances. There was the arrow-root before her, Miss Priscilla standing beside her, Miss Ronaldson looking at her. The spoon was actually put into her hand, with a complacent "now, my dear!" What could she do but eat? And, curious to say, she was the better for eating; for she had taken nothing at breakfast, and very little more at luncheon; her appetite had been failing her for weeks: and, to Miss Priscilla's complete triumph, Katharine laid down her spoon at last, with—"Thank you, I really do think it has done me good."—"To be sure, my dear," was Miss Priscilla's reply, "you may rely upon it I shouldn't have made you take it, if I hadn't known it would do you good. I am not at all for quacking, or making people eat against their wills, when it's not necessary; but Deborah's arrow-root is very superior, though I say it that shouldn't say it."—"Even poor Charlie allows that," said Miss Ronaldson. "His mother wrote us word that when he was ill he often said he wished he had Deborah to cook for him; but then he's so fond of everything connected with Rilworth." An impulse of safety made Katharine resolutely stand up, and wonder whether the chaise was coming, and go to the glass, which hung over the mantel-piece, to arrange her bonnet. She was shocked at her face; it looked dreadfully old; and the thought crossed her whether those who had known her a year and a half before would recognise her. She had very little personal vanity, at least that she was aware of, but it seemed to have been awakened by that glance, and she could not escape from it. She longed to ask some person—the Miss Ronaldsons, or any one—whether she really did look so old. Yet, if she had been answered in the negative, it would not have satisfied her; she had seen herself, and that was sufficient. She turned

away from the glass ashamed of herself, because her own image haunted her.

It pursued her through the desultory conversation which followed; and the parting good-byes, and words of advice, and messages of remembrance to her mother. It pursued her whilst she talked to her brother as they drove home, though topics were touched upon which at another time might have aroused no slight degree of interest; it never left her even when she went back to her mother, to tell her all that she had been doing and saying, and all that every one else had done or said; and it was stamped upon her memory by Selina's last words when they parted for the night:—"Why, Katharine, going into Rilworth has not made you look younger than you did." That speech made Katharine consult her glass again when she went upstairs, and certainly a more haggard face she had seldom seen reflected there. Young? No! she could almost believe that youth was quite gone. She was six-and-twenty,—she would be seven-and-twenty her next birthday, — and formerly she had looked upon seven-and-twenty as old age. Charles Ronaldson was two-and-thirty, but that was still young for a man. Life seemed opening before him, and closing behind her. If they were to meet, he would see her so changed that he must be disappointed, and then naturally his thoughts would turn to some one brighter and gayer than herself. It was distance, doubtless, which kept up his feeling for her, if he really had any; for, after all, his remembering her in that way when he was ill might be only his natural kindness of heart. He was always a clinging, loving person, and he had a special feeling for everything connected with the remembrance of his childhood and boyhood. It seemed wrong and vain to build upon such a sandy

foundation as those few words of Miss Ronaldson's. Yet Katharine did build upon them in spite of herself,—beginning by an intense, longing wish to see the book of prayer; thinking why it should have been chosen for her,—whether it implied that she could feel with him on those subjects; and, if so, whether perhaps such a bond of union would not be dearer to him than any other; and so on, and on, till the dream of happiness became too bright for a mind so chastened to indulge in without fear; and Katharine with a strong effort cast it from her, and knelt to pray that she might be taught to seek only for a heavenly love, and in that to find her rest.

CHAPTER LI.

It was late the next morning when Katharine went down to breakfast, for she was still feeling far from well. John and Selina were together without Mrs. Ashton, and Katharine, when she entered the room, found that she had interrupted a conversation of some private nature. This was an uncomfortable consciousness, and Selina had not sufficient tact to render it less so. She stopped suddenly, looked cross, and said mysteriously, "We will talk about it again by-and-by," and then the children were called, and breakfast began. Katharine tried to make the conversation natural and general, but no one was inclined to talk, for each had a subject for thought which could not be shared. Katharine was ashamed of hers, and longed to forget it, but the little that was said brought it back to her. John had heard of Charles Ronaldson's illness, and spoke even more seriously than the Miss Ronaldsons of the danger he had been in; and Selina, more from

curiosity than interest, questioned and cross-questioned, till she brought out not only what John knew, but what other people conjectured. Katharine sat by and said nothing, though she could not help feeling that two pair of eyes were glancing at her from time to time, as if scanning her countenance. "My mother will be down soon, Kate, I suppose?" said John, as they rose from the breakfast table.—"Not very soon; she is tired this morning," replied Katharine, "and I persuaded her to keep in bed." John looked a little disconcerted, and Selina said meaningly, "She wouldn't mind your going to her."—"It is not well to disturb her with business too early," said Katharine, quickly.—"No, perhaps not; but I should not keep her long," observed John.—"And she will be more flurried after she has had the trouble of dressing," said Selina. Katharine again repeated that it would be better to wait, unless the business were something very urgent.—"It may be urgent," was John's reply; "but, however, Kate, I can't fuss her if you think it better not."—"I shall just go up-stairs and see how she is," said Selina, decidedly; "one can't judge at all what she can bear without seeing her." John faintly begged her to stop, but his wish evidently was that she should go, and she did go; Katharine not daring to prevent her, knowing that the effort would have failed, and would unquestionably have caused a storm.

"Selly is very anxious this morning," was John's observation, when he was left alone with his sister. "When once she gets a thing into her head, she is full of it till it is settled."—"I thought there was something going on," replied Katharine; "what is it now?"—"Only the old story under a new form," replied John; "you told me that you heard in Rilworth yesterday about the Australian Land

Company." Katharine's heart sank. "You are not going to talk to my mother about that project, John?" she exclaimed in alarm.—"Well, no, not about our going, which is the only thing she cares for, but ——" he hesitated; "you know, Kate, it might be a very good investment for her, and so for you too."—"As far as I am concerned I am very well contented with the investment we have already," replied Katharine; "it may not bring in as high an interest as some others, but, humanly speaking, it is perfectly safe."—"So like a woman! not understanding, and thinking only of safety!" replied John; "I wonder you don't insist upon locking your money up in a desk, and taking out only as much as you want from day to day;—that is the only kind of safety women understand; something they can see." Katharine laughed. "Well, I could understand some comfort in that," she said; "at least, one should see, as people say, to the end of one's affairs. But I do wish, John, you would not worry my mother's mind with these matters; she really is not fit to attend to them, and," she added more sadly, "I can't say I think lately she always understands them."—"Now or never," replied John; "Colonel Forbes says that; and you would trust him, Katharine."—"Yes, up to a certain point," said Katharine; "but I should like to know a little more what he has to do with the company."—"Oh! as to that, nothing in the money way," replied John; "he is not in the least responsible."—"I wish he was," said Katharine.—"Why, how perverse of you!" exclaimed her brother; "I venture to say, that if I had told you he was responsible, you would have been afraid of some secret underhand dealing."—"No, never, never," exclaimed Katharine; "I would trust Colonel Forbes to the very last farthing, if his own honour was engaged. I should be quite certain he would not let any one be

misled." — "Then what is it you do doubt?" inquired John. — "Nothing," replied Katharine, "and yet everything." John turned away hastily. Katharine laid her hand upon his shoulder: "That was a stupid, provoking speech of mine, John; but I always fancy there is some political motive in what Colonel Forbes does." — "Possibly," replied John, drily; "but in this case it happens he does nothing; only the chairman of the company is a great friend of his, and so he naturally wishes the thing to succeed." — "A great political friend!" said Katharine. "Yes, I suppose so;—I don't know. Colonel Forbes' friends are all political, arn't they?" Katharine smiled. "I never heard of any others," she said; "but you are his political enemy; why does he urge your mixing yourself up with this Land Company?" — "He does not urge it; he only tells me that to buy land in Australia will make our fortune." — "A strong temptation," observed Katharine, "even if it is not direct urging; but John, dear, where is the money to come from?" John was silent. After a few seconds he said, rather sulkily, "Of course, Kate, if you put your face against it, there is nothing more to be said." — "I don't put my face against it, or for it," said Katharine; "but I should like to let well alone, it won't be for very long," she added, sadly. Selina just then returned. She had been helping Mrs. Ashton at her breakfast, and putting her room in order, and now she was come to say that John might go up whenever he liked; but John stood irresolute. "Kate thinks it will worry her, Selly," he said. — "Certainly it will just now," observed Katharine; "she never is fit for business so early in the morning." — "She is particularly clear and comfortable this morning," observed Selina; "I never saw her better." — "And Jenkins, the agent, comes over

this afternoon," said John, "on purpose to talk over matters."—"And nothing can be done without Mrs. Ashton's consent," said Selina.—"And George Andrews and Madden talked of walking over too," continued John. Katharine's face expressed great surprise. "I did not know it had gone so far as that," she said; "my mother is not in the least prepared for such discussions, and I am sure they will make her ill." John looked at his wife with an air of considerable embarrassment. Selina, too, was for a moment confused, but having less delicacy of feeling than her husband, she was able to take the affairs of life more coolly. "It's no use mincing matters, Kate," she said; "you see it's a question for John as well as for you; and so, of course, he is right, for my sake and the children's, to do what will be best for our interest."—"That is —" interposed John, more gently; but Selina went on quickly: "There must, sooner or later, be a division of the property, Kate, and John wants your mother to let him invest what would be his half now."—"Yes," continued John; "invest it in what will bring in twenty per cent. instead of four, and give her a large income now, and make me by-and-by a rich man, instead of a ruined one." He waited anxiously for Katharine's reply, whilst Selina watched the expression of her face with an angry curiosity which she could not conceal. But Katharine remained perfectly silent. "I wouldn't have thought of mentioning the thing if it hadn't been necessary," said John.—"For the children's sakes," added Selina. Still silence. "Why don't you speak, Kate?" asked John, reproachfully; "one would think we were doing you a wrong."—"That is my mother's business, John, dear," said Katharine, with a gentle but decided tone, and she turned towards the door. John

caught her arm:—"It isn't like you, Kate," he exclaimed; "when you had always put yourself as one with us, and said you were so fond of the children. I thought you would have been only too willing to consent to anything which would be for their interest."—"Poor little things!" exclaimed Selina, "they will have little enough to look to in life, if they are only to depend upon Katharine."—"That's not true, Selly," observed John, quickly; "Kate would do anything she could for them if it came to a pinch. But can't you see, Kitty," and he drew nearer to his sister, and spoke rapidly and with a flushed face, which showed an uneasy mind; "can't you see, that, being a father, I am bound to look to what would be good for the children?"—"And when your mother said she wished it to be share and share alike," interrupted Selina, "how were you to turn against her? It would have worried her out of her life."—"We talked it over carefully only two days ago," continued John, "and she told me that you had said you only wanted to have just enough to be independent; and that I knew you would have if the money was put into the Australian Land Company." This new speculation, then, was the salve to John's conscience. Katharine was deeply pained. John watched her countenance with anxiety. "Kate thought to have had it all for herself, and to set up as a fine lady before long, I suppose," exclaimed Selina, with a toss of the head. Katharine turned round quickly,—“I have thought of nothing, Selina, but of making my mother comfortable whilst she lives, and doing whatever God may be pleased to point out afterwards. He knows that, whatever that may be, it will be hard work enough then.” Tears gathered in her eyes, and she moved away to hide them. John followed her: "Come, Kitty," he said, kissing

her ; “ don’t let us have words about such a matter as this.” — “ No, indeed John, we wont,” replied Katharine, with a look of excessive distress ; “ I can’t bear it. Please don’t think about me, only my mother ! If you will just spare her worry, and let her settle everything as she likes !” — “ That wont do, John,” said Selina ; “ Mrs. Ashton is not one to do anything without Kate’s consent.” — “ I will give my mother my opinion when she asks it, Selina,” said Katharine. — “ But you won’t give it to us,” said John ; “ that’s not fair, Kitty.” — “ I have nothing to give an opinion about yet,” replied Katharine ; “ you have told me nothing, or next to it ; only it is startling to hear of Mr. Andrews and Henry Madden coming over here suddenly, to talk about business which my mother has never heard of.” — “ It couldn’t be helped,” said John ; “ Jenkins, the agent, hurries matters at such a rate, there’s no time for preparing any one ; and as for Henry Madden, he has a notion of taking a share in the speculation himself.” More and more complicated the business was becoming ; and Katharine thought with terror of her mother’s feeble state of health, whilst something like indignation rose up in her mind at the cruelty of thus disturbing her few remaining days. “ You talk of being hurried, John,” she said, “ but if your letters to Colonel Forbes have been about this matter you have been thinking of it a tolerably long time.” — “ But he couldn’t do anything,” interrupted Selina ; “ it wasn’t till your mother told him for certain, Kate, that he should have half the property, that it was worth while troubling about it ; and that wasn’t till two days ago.” — “ It was not fixed till then, that is,” said John ; “ though she had said before she should wish it.” — “ It’s my belief that was what was fretting her when she had the stroke,” said Selina. Katharine turned very pale,

and sat down. John's countenance told the reproaches of his conscience. "There will be quite enough for both, Kitty," he said, seizing upon the grievance which he supposed was rankling in her mind, "if you will only consent to the investment." Katharine started up:—"Take it all—all, John—do what you will with it, only spare my mother." John turned to his wife,—"Perhaps it would be better to wait a little, Selly."—"And lose the opportunity of making twenty per cent., and get deeper into the mire, and at last be ruined," said Selly.—"She is right there, Kitty," said John; "the long and short of the matter is, that if somehow or other some of us don't make some money very soon, we shall all go to the dogs together; and this is the best opportunity that has offered, or will be likely to offer, for many a long day."—"And if Kate would throw herself into it, instead of putting herself against it, there would be no trouble in the matter," said Selina. "Mrs. Ashton would do anything, no matter what, which we all told her was right."—"I must first see it is right before I say it is," said Katharine; "but I cannot pretend, John, to interfere between my mother and you; all I beg is, that whatever may be arranged, I may be put out of the question."—"And you won't join," said John, with a vexed look; "that was what I had hoped—that we might have made a common cause."—"I can't say," said Katharine, "and I am not called upon to say. I can't bear talking in this way," she added; "it is my mother's concern, not mine."—"But you put your face against it."—"I put my wishes for delay," said Katharine—"not taking my mother by surprise."—"It is too late for that," observed Selina. "Henry Madden comes over this afternoon to talk about giving up the shop, and having a great sale,

and embarking everything in the Land Company." — "Then he will kill my mother," said Katharine, with a painful quietness of tone. — "Not if you are with us to help us, Kate," said John quickly. "After all my mother's fondness for me, it is you, Kate, she really reckons upon; and depend upon it she won't go against you; and what I thought, and Selly too, was that if you could see things as we do, we might just go to her, and put matters before her generally, not troubling her with any business scarcely, and so get her to consent without difficulty." — "Impossible," said Katharine; "it would be giving advice against my conscience." — "Pshaw!" exclaimed John, impatiently, "how can conscience have anything to do with it? Surely, we have a right to get twenty per cent. for our money, if we can." — "But we have no right to enter into speculations which may ruin us," said Katharine. — "Oh! you women!" exclaimed John, throwing up his hands, despairingly; "who says it will ruin us?" — "No one," replied Katharine; "all I say is wait and inquire." — "But I have inquired; I have asked every possible question, and so has Colonel Forbes. And Jenkins, the agent, has come down on purpose to forward the scheme, and George Andrews enters into it heart and soul. Where on earth can the danger be?" — "Very possibly, nowhere," said Katharine. — "And yet you won't help us," said Selina, angrily. — "Certainly not, till I know more." — "But if you were to know more; if you were to be quite, absolutely certain it would all turn out well, would you venture then?" — "I would wait," said Katharine, "because I should think it wrong to run the risk of troubling my mother with business." John tossed into the air a stick with which he was playing, and exclaimed with an impatient laugh, "Then it's all a mere waste of

words!"—"As far as I am concerned," said Katharine; "but, as I said before, I cannot interfere with any plan of yours, John, if you think it right."—"I don't understand," said John, "what you mean by right. Is there anything wrong in getting twenty per cent. if you can?"—"Ask her, rather," interrupted Selina, "whether, under any circumstances, she would join herself." Katharine hesitated a moment, then she replied, frankly, "I don't think that is a question for me to consider now. It is quite enough that I cannot possibly find it in my heart to trouble my mother. We all know that she cannot, humanly speaking, be spared to us very long, and I would rather not be the one to turn her thoughts to this world's cares, when there is only one thing which she need really think of."—"Very satisfactory!" said Selina; "one might be sure that Kate would always have a good excuse for putting herself on what she thinks the safe side." Katharine did not reply, but the feeling of injustice was very hard to bear. "I don't see what is to be done," observed John, moodily. A thought of delay, and consequent relief, suddenly struck Katharine. She paused, hesitated, and then said, quickly, "Will ten days make any great difference?"—"Henry Madden comes over this afternoon," replied Selina.—"But we can't, indeed we can't, have things hurried in this way, John," exclaimed Katharine; "if the plan were ever so good, it would not be right." John considered a little, and replied, looking doubtfully at Selina, "I suppose ten days would not so very much matter."—"If it all falls to the ground it won't be my fault, remember," said Selina. Katharine did not notice the interruption. "Wait but ten days, John, dear," she said earnestly, "and then I promise either to consider the plan well, if it should seem

good; or, if not, to show you reasons which I believe will satisfy you that I am right in objecting. Anything to save my mother," she added.—"Yes, anything to save her," repeated John, his face brightening up; "and you know very well, Kitty, that if you join with us, there will be no discussion and no trouble."

He kissed his sister affectionately, and Katharine, though feeling that she had bound herself hastily by a promise which she might find it difficult to keep, thanked him cordially. Selina stood by, twisting her watch ribbon, and appearing anything but pleased. — "Cheer up, Selly," said John, good humouredly, "ten days will soon be gone."—"And what is to come at the end?" was Selina's reply.

A question which only time could answer, yet which Katharine was obliged to put to herself immediately. Yet she had little leisure for thought all the morning. Mrs. Ashton was to be attended to, and soothed, and made comfortable, after having been fidgeted by waiting a long time in her room, expecting John,—who was called away to the farm, and could not go to her after all; then the children were to be taught their lessons, and a good many little household matters were to be attended to; and at one o'clock they all dined, and at four the post went out, and before that Katharine must decide whether or not she could make up her mind to write the letter which in a moment of eagerness she had fancied would help her out of all her difficulties—a very simple letter—to Charles Ronaldson, to ask him to make inquiries about the Australian Land Company, and send her his opinion the very earliest day possible.

Strange it was, that the idea of sending this letter should excite such a tumult in Katharine's mind. The day before she would have written it, not with-

out some feeling of peculiar interest, yet with such comparative indifference that she would not have considered the question twice. Now, something seemed to whisper to her that perhaps she was wrong, perhaps she had a double motive. The sight of the well-known handwriting would be so cheering, and a letter all to herself, though only upon business, would be such a great treasure! Then, too, she might hear from himself how he really was; and deep down in her heart there was a secret anxiety which added tenfold to all her other cares. But the greater the temptation, the more Katharine shrank from yielding to it. Again and again she made up her mind to write, and then reverted to the former doubts and self-questionings. Post-time drew near, she had but half an hour to spare; the delay of a day might be of great consequence. Reason told her that she was doing nothing but what was perfectly simple and right, and she sat down, and took a pen in her hand; feeling whispered that she had two motives, and she threw it aside. But reason gained the victory. Katharine's simple-minded integrity of heart was a great assistance to her judgment. She was very much needing advice, and Charles Ronaldson was the only person who could give it. This was, after all, the true state of the question, and Katharine at length scolded herself for her irresolution, and without allowing herself any further time for consideration, wrote her request; but it was a short, abrupt one.—“My dear Mr. Ronaldson,—I am writing in great haste, and must trust to your kindness to excuse the trouble I am giving you, but I have a very great wish to learn every particular possible about an Australian Land Company, which has been lately formed. The office is at 44. Bridge-street, Westminster. All you can tell me as to its object and stability I

shall be most thankful for. May I beg you to make inquiry about it directly, and let me know immediately? All beg to be kindly remembered. —Very truly yours,

“KATHARINE ASHTON.

“P. S. We are very sorry to hear you have been so ill, and hope you are better. Pray give my kind regards to Mrs. Ronaldson.”

Katharine read over the note twice, and was tempted to look at it a third time; but that would have been too silly. A taper was lighted, the letter sealed, and sent; and she went to read to her mother, and to try and forget that four days at least must elapse before she could receive an answer.

CHAPTER LII.

RATHER more than a fortnight from that time, Colonel Forbes was sitting at breakfast alone, in a luxurious dining-room in Eaton Place; a sheet of the *Times* lay before him. He was studying the parliamentary debates, especially his own speeches. There was great interest in seeing his own words caught, as it were, and returned to him in a new and improved form,—for certainly the regular sentences which flowed so easily from the pen of the reporter, were by no means as smooth and fluent when spoken by himself. He was not a very eloquent man; he had not quick feeling enough to be carried away by enthusiasm, and his ideas were not sufficiently large to give him much influence as a leader; but he was a safe, hard-working partizan, and when he chose to give himself the trouble, could

collect and master a great deal of important information, which after being well prepared beforehand, was often brought out in a lucid if not a very striking form. In fact he was a useful person, and useful people are far more likely than geniuses to gain permanent influence.

Colonel Forbes was much happier in London than in the country; he felt his own value there, and this was essential to him. Besides, he had less time for thought. If worried at home, he could go to his club; if tormented by little domestic cares, he could escape from them into the wider circle of politics. He liked London as much as Jane disliked it. The difference between them was that, when Jane longed for the country, she tried the more heartily to be reconciled to London; but when Colonel Forbes longed for London he took pains to exaggerate the evils of the country. He was looking very placid that morning as he reclined in his easy chair, occasionally sipping a cup of most fragrant coffee, and indulging in the flavour of a French *paté*. He did not miss Jane, for her being there would have been a call upon him for conversation, and he was not in the humour for it. Jane never made her appearance at breakfast now; indeed she was seldom out of her room till eleven o'clock. But this was not to be wondered at, London hours were so late, and Colonel Forbes was always having company at home, which she was expected to entertain, or urging her to go out, and so obliging her to sit up beyond her usual hours of rest. The alteration in her habits, therefore, was not much noticed. Colonel Forbes was waited upon by his own man, he could not bear to have any one else about him; and Crewe was his very image and shadow, having lived with him till he had acquired his master's accent, peculiarities of expression, and

even his very walk and turn of the head. He fitted to Colonel Forbes, and told by his very look to whom he belonged as plainly as a cap or a bonnet which is acknowledged at once to be "so like such an one." Crewe knew exactly when to leave his master to himself, and when to pay him little attentions. He had learned the degree of favour to bestow upon each individual visitor, the amount of hope which could be afforded to every urgent petitioner. He acted like the hands of the clock to mark the movements of the hidden pendulum; and it required no long acquaintance with the master and the servant to calculate from the manner of the one what were likely to be the inclinations of the other.

Crewe did not stay in the room with Colonel Forbes this morning, he saw that he wished to be alone; but he looked in upon him from time to time and replenished the fire and gave a gentle push to a plate of hot toast which it seemed was likely to be forgotten, and then vanished again, with a slow, noiseless, solemn step, and that same air of grave thought which Colonel Forbes had habitually acquired since he devoted himself to the intricacies of parliamentary life. "Any one waiting for me, Crewe?" said Colonel Forbes, looking up from the newspaper.—"A young man in the back hall, sir; and Mr. Davis, the wine-merchant, in the little waiting-room; and another person, Miss Ashton, from the country, in the housekeeper's room." Crewe hesitated a little in giving this last piece of information, he knew that it would not be agreeable. "Mrs. Brown has taken care of Miss Ashton, sir. She said she could wait very well."—"From the country did you say?" inquired the Colonel.—"Came up last night, sir, and lodging with a cousin in Great Russell Street, and going down again directly; only wishing to see you, sir."—"Me! Mrs. Forbes you

mean." — "No, sir, you, so she says; but Mrs. Brown is looking after her; she will wait very well." Colonel Forbes was reading, or pretending to read the newspaper still, and Crewe stood without even a look of impatience for some seconds, and then left the room. Colonel Forbes rose and stood with his back to the fire. A number of indistinct thoughts were crowding upon his mind, which he did not try to separate. Some were of parliamentary matters — some of more personal interest. They did not happen to cross his will, and yet his mind was troubled. He hated the name of Ashton, and he tried not to think of it. He thought he would see Mr. Davis, the wine-merchant, and the young man in the back hall, and settle their business first. What did it signify to him that Crewe had said Miss Ashton was come up from the country to see him? He rang the bell, and Crewe answered it. "Crewe, beg Mr. Davis to wait for me a few minutes, and show Miss Ashton to my study." The very reverse order from that which he had the moment before intended to give, but impatience was his master.

"Miss Ashton! sir." — Crewe threw open the study-door very wide, alarmingly so, but it had no effect upon Katharine. She came forward in her habitual quiet, self-possessed manner, curtsied, and sat down unawed by the piles of blue books and packets of letters and papers covering the library table, and bespeaking more plainly than words the importance of him to whom they belonged.

Colonel Forbes sat down also. Katharine put up her veil, her hand trembled a little, that was her only sign of nervousness; but she was very pale, and thin, and worn, and there was a dim, dark look about her eyes, which seemed to tell of sleepless nights, and days of haunting thought. Colonel

Forbes' expectant manner, the slightly bent attitude, and irritable motion of the hand, saying as clearly as action could, "I have a great press of business upon my hands, pray make haste," would have been very trying to any one. If he would only have said "I hope you are not tired with your journey!" or, "How have you left all at home?" But no, Katharine was one of those persons to whom he never vouchsafed more words than were absolutely necessary. So she began, "I am sorry to trouble you, sir; I am afraid you are very much engaged."—"Oh! not at all, not at all," the tone meaning just the reverse of the words. "It is about my brother's business, sir, if I might just ask a question." "Certainly," and the listening attitude was more marked, but no help was given. Katharine was growing so nervous, that her ideas were fast falling into confusion; she made an effort to recover herself, however, and said at once, "Perhaps, sir, you would be good enough to give me your opinion of the Australian Land Company, which my brother—that is Mr. Jenkins—which I think, sir, you have something to do with." Colonel Forbes leant back in his chair, and looked relieved: "The Australian Land Company! let me think; ah yes, I remember. Jenkins is the agent."—"There is a Mr. Jenkins at Rilworth, now, sir," said Katharine, anxiously.—"Indeed! the same man, no doubt. The Australian Land Company! Your brother wrote to me about it. He thinks of going out, I believe."—"I don't know. I hope not, sir," said Katharine.—Colonel Forbes' tone was impatient. "He couldn't do better, depend upon it, Miss Ashton. A capital opening for a young man, a fine field for adventure. He will do very wisely to go."—"He only talks of buying land now as a speculation," said Katharine.—"Indeed!" and Colonel Forbes' countenance fell; "then I mis-

understood him, but I suppose he will go ultimately.” —“I don’t know, sir. He would be glad, at least I should be,” she added, correcting herself, “if we could be quite sure this company is safe.” —“Ah! an important question. There are a great many speculations in these days. Jenkins will tell you more about it than I can. Your brother has written several times to ask me some particulars, and I made Jenkins send him all the papers; I am sorry they were not satisfactory.” —“My brother says they are so,” said Katharine. —“I am glad to hear that. Jenkins is patronised by a friend of mine; no doubt he is an honest fellow, he will give you every possible information. If you like to have a note of introduction to him” —Colonel Forbes began to write, but Katharine interrupted him. “I would not trouble you for that, sir, my brother knows Mr. Jenkins; only perhaps you can tell me something yourself.” —“Very little, I am afraid. It is not my province. I would recommend you to go to the chairman.” —Katharine looked very blank. “It was the opinion of a friend, sir, which I wanted, not of one of the company.” —“No doubt, very natural. I trust you will find some one able to assist you, but it is quite out of my power. Can I help you in any other way?” Colonel Forbes stood up, and Katharine felt obliged to rise also. —“I shall be very glad to assist your brother, I assure you, in any other way,” said Colonel Forbes, patronisingly. “Land in Australia is becoming extremely valuable; I have no doubt he will succeed there; it is a capital investment of money. Good morning. I hope all your family are well.” The bell was rung for Crewe to open the door, and show Miss Ashton out. Katharine felt angry and bewildered. She paused, trying to recollect why she had come, what questions she meant to have asked. But there stood Colonel Forbes, looking at her,

and Crewe holding the door open for her ; there was no alternative but to do what both evidently wished her to do. "Crewe, ask Mr. Davis to walk up," said Colonel Forbes. — "Yes, sir;" and Crewe hurried Katharine away, knowing by the tone of his master's voice that the sooner she was gone the better.

"Par ici, s'il vous plait, mademoiselle." Katharine was stopped in the hall by a smart French lady's maid, with eager black eyes, and crisp black curls, wearing a dark green silk dress, fitting so perfectly that it was a marvel whether she could ever take it off, and an ornament of white lace and pink ribbon at the back of her head, styled by courtesy a cap, and speaking in a shrill scraping tone which had almost the effect of setting the teeth on edge. Miss Richardson's French had not been Parisian, and Katharine had heard but little of it such as it was; yet she had sufficient acquaintance with the language to understand that she was to follow her new acquaintance, whose interruption was clearly not liked by Crewe. In fact there was a sudden halt, and they confronted each other for a moment, as if about to have a war of words, but Crewe's discretion got the better of his valour, and with a most stately bow to Katharine, which would have rivalled that of Colonel Forbes himself, he yielded her reluctantly to the guidance of Mademoiselle Laurette. "Par ici, mademoiselle, par ici," exclaimed Laurette, from time to time, as she flitted before Katharine up the staircase. "Madame is quite ready. Madame is a little indisposed. Madame will be quite charmed." She did not even pause to knock at the door of the dressing-room, but threw it open with overpowering noise, and in her shrillest and most jarring tone, announced the name of Miss Ashton. Jane started up from the sofa on which she had been lying, with an exclamation of delight, but sank back

again immediately. "Eau-de-Cologne, Vinaigre aromatique, Essence de lavande," ejaculated Laurette, standing in the middle of the room and clasping her hands. Ah! la pauvre madame, la pauvre! la pauvre!" Katharine went up to the sofa to give Jane her bottle of salts, then sitting down beside her, said, "Dear Mrs. Forbes, I hope I have not done wrong in asking to see you." Jane smiled. "Wrong, dear Katharine? What should I have thought if you had not asked! There is not much the matter, only I have been ill again." "Laurette," and she turned to the maid, "you can go." Laurette scowled, and did not move. "If I want you I will send for you," repeated Jane. Laurette still retained her position for a few seconds, then muttered between her teeth, "Comme madame veut," and departed.

Jane moved to the arm-chair, but her limbs trembled very much, and Katharine saw that the hand which she stretched out to support herself, was painfully thin. "You are not as well as you were at Maplestead, I am afraid, dear Mrs. Forbes," said Katharine.—"Not quite, perhaps, but don't talk about me, you look so ill yourself."—"My illness is chiefly worry," said Katharine; "there is nothing otherwise amiss."—"Is it about home matters? Won't you tell me?" said Jane.—"Perhaps I ought not," was Katharine's reply, "it is such a long story."—"You are come up to London on business, I suppose," said Jane.—"I came up to see Colonel Forbes," replied Katharine.—"To see Philip! and you never told me, and has he helped you?" Jane's face brightened as she asked the question, and her eyes became quite brilliant. "He would have helped me, I dare say, if he could," replied Katharine, and Jane's momentary look of pleasure was gone.—"He is very busy," she observed, in a tone of apology.—"It was only a question about an

Australian Land Company," said Katharine; "perhaps I might just as well have written it; but letters don't always explain things well," she added, attempting a smile, which ended in a quivering of the lip.—"You are not going to Australia!" exclaimed Jane, in an accent of alarm.—"I hope not; certainly not if I can help it; but I don't know what we are all going to do."—"But your mother?" continued Jane, in the same tone. "She is travelling fast to a far better land," said Katharine; "she has had another paralytic stroke." There was scarcely a change in her voice, but her eyes were glassy with tears. "I am going back to her to-night," she continued; "that is, if possible. I may be kept till to-morrow."—"Poor child!" said Jane; she held her hand fondly, but she could attempt no other comfort.—"I will tell you about it, if I may," continued Katharine; "that will save you the trouble of asking questions. My brother wanted to buy land in Australia, but he had no money, only the hope of anything my mother might give. He talked to me about it, and I was afraid, and begged him to wait. I did not like my mother to be worried, and I wanted to ask a friend's opinion," her voice trembled, and she paused to recover herself. "My sister-in-law urged the matter very much, but at last, they both consented to wait for ten days, and I wrote, but I did not receive an answer."—"Not till after the ten days," said Jane, trying to help her, for she spoke with great difficulty.—"It was only two days over," said Katharine; "but they would not wait; that is, John would not have cared, only people hurried him so, Mr. Andrews, and Henry Madden, and others. — Selina and they went to my mother" — poor Katharine's composure quite gave way. "I told them how it would be," she continued impetuously; "Selina knew my mother could not

bear business, and now they say it is my fault. Perhaps it was, perhaps I ought to have given in; I know I am obstinate, and Selina says I had an eye to my own interests. Perhaps I had; I know I am selfish, I know I can't bear risks; she might never have had the stroke, if there had not been all the arguments which worried her. If I had joined with them, she would have trusted, and taken it all quietly, for she did not understand much about it, and she would have taken my word. But I felt so they were wrong, and I could not help saying it, and my mother was confused, and I am afraid we were all irritated, and——oh! it was very terrible." Katharine buried her face in her hands and groaned in the anguish of her heart.—“But she will understand about it all, when she comes to herself again, dear Katharine,” said Jane, gently. Katharine looked up with a ghastly smile, and repeated incredulously, the word “when.”—“I suppose she is better now?” said Jane, “or you would not have left her.”—“She does not know any one,” said Katharine; “but Mr. Fowler says she may linger for weeks.”—“And you came to consult Colonel Forbes?” inquired Jane.—“I was driven to it,” said Katharine, speaking in a tone so deep and husky, that Jane would scarcely have recognised it. “The constant discussions were so bad for us all; John means no harm, he is urged on by others. He knows how soon all there is must be his and mine, and people are offering to advance money if he will make up his mind, and he says if I will promise to join with him everything will prosper.”—“But you have your friend's judgment to fall back upon,” said Jane.—“It was no opinion,” replied Katharine, with a quietness which was unnatural. “It was merely a formal note from a kind of clerk, saying my business should be attended to. I cannot write

again.”—“And what does Colonel Forbes say?”—
“Nothing.” Katharine’s tone was despairing. “I will talk to him, I will ask him,” began Jane; and then she checked herself and added, “I would if I imagined it could be of any use; but he thinks it right to be very cautious in giving his opinion.”—“People have not been cautious in using his name,” said Katharine, bitterly. “It was that which has caught every one. Mr. Andrews made John believe at first, that Colonel Forbes was the chairman of the company.”—“And has he nothing to do with it?” inquired Jane.—“He is the friend of the chairman,” said Katharine, “and he sent John some papers; I don’t think there can be any other connection; but he does not say much, and I could not ask him much.” Jane was silent. She knew too well what that impenetrable manner was which her husband could put on when in the least out of humour. “Then what do you mean to do?” she inquired.—“I don’t know—go back again as soon as I can.”—“And what do they want you to do?”—“Promise to go shares with John in his speculation,” said Katharine.—“But you will not consent?”—“I don’t mean to do so; but it is very difficult to say no.”—“And you would have to go with them to Australia?” said Jane.—“John never says he is going,” replied Katharine; “but I am sure it will come to that by-and-by. What he says now is that the investment is much better than anything in England, and he wants to put the whole concern into Henry Madden’s hands in some way, and for him to give up the shop, and for them to be as it were partners.”—“It might answer, I suppose,” said Jane.—“Yes, if we were quite sure this company was safe, and if Henry Madden was not selfish and John was more prudent; but I distrust it all; I can’t help it. And it so very dreadful to

have to think about it now, when I feel what the plan has brought upon us already. If they would only have let it rest for the time! It could not have been a long delay. But that is done," she added with a heavy sigh.—"And what is to be done next is the thing to be considered," said Jane. "I do hope, Katharine, you won't run any risk; it may be the ruin of them all if you do."—"That is what I think," said Katharine. "If John's plans should fail, they will none of them have any one to look to for help but me."—"But, my dear Katharine, any little fortune which you may have will only be sufficient for yourself; it cannot help them."—"I have health and strength," said Katharine, "and I can work. But I cannot bear to look on; and, dear Mrs. Forbes, I ought not to do so; I ought to trust that when the time comes I shall be shown what I ought to do. The worst is," she continued, "to be talking of all this when the money is not ours, and when it must be such misery for it to be ours; but it is not John's doing, he never would be so unfeeling. Oh! the marriage!"—"She is not altered from what she was as a girl," said Jane. —"No; but please we won't talk about her; I never let myself do it if I can help it. I don't think I have anything more to say, so perhaps I ought to go."—"Not yet," said Jane; "you know I have not seen you for such a long time."—"And I have heard nothing about you," replied Katharine; "though I need not ask, I am sure London does not agree with you."—"London might, but the life does not," said Jane, "the late hours are so bad."—"I thought Dr. Lowe forbade them," observed Katharine. Jane smiled. "Yes, he forbids, but who follows a doctor's advice precisely? I can't say no, when Philip asks me to go out."—"But you cannot possibly be strong enough," said Katharine. "I

should think you could not even sit up and talk at home.”—“That is because you see me early in the day,” replied Jane. “You don’t know what I am when I am made up for the afternoon and evening.” Katharine became very grave. “Dear Mrs. Forbes,” she said, “is it right?” Jane was silent. “May I say what I really think?” continued Katharine.—Jane’s smile was inexpressibly sweet: “Yes, surely, as in the old school days.”—“When I was always so blunt,” said Katharine, thoughtfully. She paused for an instant, then the words, “Is it not deceit?” escaped her, as it were involuntarily. Jane looked pained for a moment, but not in the least annoyed. “I hope not,” she said; “I do not mean it to be.”—“But it may be, though you don’t mean it, and by-and-by Colonel Forbes”——“He knows the risk,” exclaimed Jane.—“I could not bear it if he did not. But, Katharine, men do not feel as women do about these things.”—“Some men do,” rose to Katharine’s lips; but she said nothing.—“They have so many important things to think of,” continued Jane; “at least I am sure Philip has. It would not be natural for him to be always thinking of me, and I can’t fret him with all my changes of headache, and sideache, and heartache; and one day is so like another he cannot understand whether I am getting better or worse; it is all very natural.”—“Dr. Lowe ought to tell him,” exclaimed Katharine with some indignation in her manner.—“Dr. Lowe does tell him,” replied Jane, gently; “he did the other day when I was ill with one of my bad attacks; and then he became very unhappy, and shut himself up in his room, and I did not see him the whole day, he was so miserable. But he was forced to go out again to the House, or to attend to some other business, and seeing me look much as I did before, he

can't understand now that there is much amiss. Indeed it's all very natural." Katharine could scarcely refrain a smile at the earnestness with which this was said, as if Jane's whole happiness depended upon exculpating her husband from all blame in Katharine's eyes.—"And it is not only the going out and seeing so many people which is trying," continued Jane, endeavouring to turn the conversation into a different channel; "but domestic affairs are so worrying, so much more so than they ought to be. Laurette tries my temper terribly."—"I should think so," said Katharine, heartily.—Jane laughed. "You would not bear with her a single day."—"Not a single hour," said Katharine.—"Well! perhaps I would not if I could help it; but if you could imagine what the difficulty is of getting a trustworthy maid! you know I have had experience,—and Laurette is really very straight-forward."—"I should be afraid it was her only virtue," said Katharine.—"It is the largest, certainly," replied Jane; "and I mean to part with her as soon as I can find any one else to suit me."—"I should like to offer myself," said Katharine, quietly. Jane laughed again. "Colonel Forbes would not like me," said Katharine, "that would be one great objection."—"And I should not like you," said Jane, more seriously, as she observed the expression of Katharine's face. "My maid! impossible!"—"Not impossible, I hope," said Katharine, "if I had no other claim—but——" she rose from her seat—"I shall go home to-night, if I can. Perhaps, dear Mrs. Forbes, you would try and let me know a little oftener how you are. If it were only one line, it would be a comfort."—"A month more and we hope to be at Maplestead," said Jane; "then there will be no need of letters."—"A month's change and chances! what will they bring?" said Katharine, sadly. Jane read in a

moment the direction of her thoughts. "God will support you, dear Katharine," she said, "whatever you may have to bear." Katharine could not answer. "How one values that prayer," continued Jane, "for His gracious and ready help; ready means so entirely what one is always wanting—help without delay."

Katharine turned aside her head to conceal the bursting tears. "Do you remember our last conversation?" continued Jane; "I hope it did me good. At least I have learnt to wish that I may have no wishes; and now I would preach the same sermon to you." Katharine took her hand affectionately. "Dear Mrs. Forbes," she said, "will you believe that if I have wishes, they are more for you than my mother. She has seen all the happiness that life can give her."—"Do not wish for me, Katharine," replied Jane, earnestly, "or do not tell me so, lest I should begin to wish again myself. The day I saw you at Maplestead," she continued, "it seemed that it would be impossible ever to conquer the constant restlessness and longing for certainty and happiness for others as well as for myself; but my life here has been good for me in that way; everything has been so put out of my power, the children and my husband, and all the home matters I was interested in; I have had nothing to do but to learn acquiescence in all things."—"Not in want of care for your health," exclaimed Katharine, quickly. Jane looked deeply pained. She did not speak for some seconds, then raising her eyes to Katharine's face, she said slowly, "We cannot alter the character and the tastes which God has given."—"But we need not give in to them," said Katharine, hesitatingly, "when the consequences will be so terrible."—"So I have said to myself many times," continued Jane, her pale face flushed with the effort at unreserve which she was making; "and, Katharine, I

have done all I could—all that a woman can do—but even for myself, it is worse to oppose than to yield, it frets me more. And to know I had thwarted my husband, and that if it were to please God to take me, I should be remembered only as having always opposed his will—I could not bear it.”—Katharine was silent. “You do not agree with me,” said Jane.—“I do not think such a state of things ought to be,” replied Katharine.—“Who is to help it?” Another pause, interrupted by a knock at the door, and the entrance of Laurette: Monsieur le Colonel wished to know if madame was alone? Jane became nervously flurried in a moment. Katharine could see the rapid pulsation in her throat. “Good-bye! dear Mrs. Forbes,” she said quickly.—“Good-bye! dear, dear Katharine;” but Jane’s eyes were fixed upon the door. “You will write to me, and tell me everything. God bless you.” — “And you, too, dear Mrs. Forbes. Oh! if I could but help you!” — “Kiss me, please,” said Jane, and Katharine bent down, and with a fond reverential affection pressed her lips to Jane’s forehead, and then hastened away.

CHAPTER LIII.

KATHARINE’s friend in Great Russell Street was a cousin of her mother’s, the wife of a linendraper. They did not often meet, but occasionally in the old times, when Mrs. Davis required country air, she had spent a month at Rilworth, and in return Mr. Ashton made Great Russell Street his headquarters whenever business called him to London. Katharine was not sorry to find herself standing

again at her cousin's door, in this comparatively quiet street, after having been rattled through the neighbourhood of Piccadilly in an omnibus, and left to find the rest of her way on foot from Oxford Street. Great Russell Street was home in its way ; she had been there several times before, and it was the beginning of those regions of dull respectability amongst which " unprotected females " can wander without fear. Her cousin's house was just opposite the British Museum, and the sentinel standing before the gateway assumed, in her eyes, the character of a solemn domestic watchman. In her childish visits to London, Katharine had believed that he was placed there as an especial mark of favour to her cousins, and never could quite divest herself of the impression that there was some peculiar safety attached to his tall fur cap and raised musket.

She hailed his appearance now, however, principally as a signal of rest, for both body and mind were exhausted. Refreshment for the former was easily to be had. The good-humoured portly dame who answered to the name of Cousin Hannah, piqued herself upon the way in which she did the honours of her very comfortable house, and Katharine, as she entered the passage, was greeted with, " Well, Kate, so you are come back, are you ? You must have had a nice, long, dusty walk ; and there's a Bath cheese waiting for you up stairs, and some Scotch ale—excellent Scotch ale as ever you tasted, or porter, if you like it better. What ! not drink porter ? " she added, replying to Katharine's look, rather than her words. " You would not say that long if you lived in London ; but never mind, come up stairs ; dinner won't be ready for this two hours. "—" I will wait for dinner, please, Cousin Hannah," said Katharine.—" Trust me for that ! Why, they'll say we've been starving you. You

look as pale as a ghost ; and there is a great deal to be done in sight-seeing before you go back.”—“Not much, I am afraid,” replied Katharine ; “for I must certainly return this evening.”—“Must ! that’s a word for the Queen, not for you,” said Mrs. Davis, good-humouredly. “Why, you can’t if you wish it. There’s been a gentleman here to see you on business, and I told him we meant to keep you here ; and, as he was going out of town for this day and next, he told me to tell you he would call the day after.” Katharine’s heart gave a sudden bound, and, stopping half-way up the rather dark staircase, she inquired if the gentleman had left his name. “No ; and I did not think he looked as if he would like to be asked. But there’s a note for you upstairs ; first go up and take off your things, and then you shall have it.” Katharine hesitated. “No, no ; not now,” said Mrs. Davis, laughing. “I shan’t have you down for the next half-hour if I let you have it now ; and I’m dying to hear how you got on in your walk, and what you’ve seen.” Katharine felt herself weak, but she could not make up her mind to show any interest in the note, though nothing would have been more simple than to say that, as it was probably upon business, she would be glad to have it at once. Conscience made her a coward, and she allowed herself to be sent upstairs like a child, and even came down again, and talked upon indifferent subjects for some minutes, before she ventured to ask, taking up a little note lying upon the mantelpiece, whether that was what the gentleman had left. “To be sure,” said Mrs. Davis ; “and you were dying of curiosity to look at it before. Oh, Kate ! Kate ! as if you could deceive me !”—“It is not a very important document,” said Katharine, glancing over it. “Mr. Ronaldson merely hopes that I shall not do anything in the business

which brought me to town till I have seen him. You have heard of Mr. Ronaldson, Cousin Hannah. He has been a good friend to us in many cases of difficulty.”—“Oh, that’s it;” and Mrs. Davis looked quite disappointed that there was no greater mystery. “And he’s coming again the day after tomorrow, is he?”—“He hopes to do so,” said Katharine, re-opening the note, and trying to conceal the keen sense of disappointment at having missed him. —“Well! then you must eat something to keep up your spirits till he does come,” said Mrs. Davis. “Here, now, I venture to say you have not tasted a better cheese since the one I sent your poor father eight years ago.” Katharine shrank from the recollection thus brought back to her, and, cutting a little piece of bread, said she would have that, if she might, and a glass of wine, and then she would go upstairs again, if her cousin did not mind, for her head was aching rather, with the noise of the omnibus. “That’s because you are not used to it. If you would just stay a month with us, you’d think no more of an omnibus than of a light chaise; but it is always the case with you folks down in the country; you ar’n’t fit to move when you come up first, and then you fuss, and fume, and get ill, and say you can’t live here. I venture to say, now,” she added, almost angrily, “you’ll be for staying at home this afternoon, instead of making the most of your time, like a sensible girl.”—“I had meant to go back by the late train, thank you, Cousin Hannah,” said Katharine, in a tone which, though she tried to keep it calm, betrayed extreme worry of mind. “Back this evening! why you are mad, Kate! a girl like you!”—“Not so much of a girl,” interrupted Katharine, with a smile; “six-and-twenty is not so very young.”—“You may be six hundred for aught I know,” exclaimed Mrs. Davis; “but I

know I nursed you when you were in long clothes, and I am not going to let you travel about by yourself at night in that fashion. Husband wouldn't hear of it; so just don't think about it, but take a bit of cheese and a glass of beer, and then go up to your room and rest, if you will, till dinner, and after that we'll talk about what is to be done in the way of sight-seeing."—"Thank you very much, but you must let me think about it, please, cousin," said Katharine, decidedly.—"Think! oh, yes! think as much as you please, only don't take it into your head to be travelling about the country at night. You've got your box taken up, and I'll come presently to help unpack it."—"Or pack the carpet-bag again," said Katharine, quietly.—"Oh, Kate, what a perverse child you always were!" said Mrs. Davis, shaking her head; "don't I remember so well how your poor mother wanted you to sing a song one day, just as you were beginning to speak, and how you would stand up and say, 'How doth the little busy bee!'"—"I don't mean to be perverse now, Cousin Hannah," replied Katharine, gently; "but I can't really decide anything yet, and my head aches very much."—"Ah! I thought how it would be when you went out this morning. And then you have told me nothing about your visit; how you found Mrs. Forbes, and whether it's true that she and the Colonel don't hit it off; for that's what Betsy Carter wrote me word from Rilworth." Poor Katharine! this was the climax. Yet she had sufficient command to check the outburst of indignation which rose to her lips, and merely saying, "Please call me, Cousin Hannah, when dinner is ready," she walked out of the room.

A very dull apartment that was of Katharine's, in spite of all the attempts at comfortable furniture; a front attic, the small windows veiled by dingy

muslin blinds, over which might be seen the roofs and chimneys of innumerable smoke-dried houses. Mrs. Davis was a good housekeeper, and neat in all her habits ; but, as she frequently said, what could ever stand against London "blacks?" certainly not Katharine's bedroom. There were scattered blacks upon the counterpane, blacks upon the uncovered boards of the floor, and upon the carpet round the bed ; blacks also upon the cloth on the dressing-table, and a whole army upon the discoloured mantelpiece ; and when Katharine looked in the glass, blacks had formed a settlement upon her forehead, and when she poured some water into the washing-basin, blacks floated merrily about in the water. Oh ! for a taste of the pure water from the springs at Moorlands, and a rush of the free, cool air from among the beech-trees at Maplestead ! It may be very weak to be affected by such trifles ; but it is human nature. Katharine was just then too worn in spirits to be able to endure petty evils quite patiently ; she threw up the window with a sense of disgust, and leant out of it, longing to catch a glimpse of the blue sky, that she might forget, for a passing moment, dirt, and noise, and misery, and the claims of whirling, anxious, unceasing care, which so oppressed her whenever she was in London, and calmly, in the presence of the Infinite Love which was her shield in the haunts of men, as amidst the lonely beauty of nature, think over her present and her future duties. She had suffered very much within the last few weeks ; far more than she had expressed to Jane, or could even venture now to recall. Terrible were the recollections of her mother's illness, but far worse was the thought of that family discord which had now made its entrance among them, under such painful circumstances. And all to be attributed to her ! That was

the accusation now constantly sounded in her ears, by Selina from anger, by John from weakness. And Katharine had borne all silently; she had gone to no one for sympathy, not even Mr. Reeves. The idea that on her mother's death-bed the little property she had to leave was to prove a source of disunion to her children was so intensely galling, that Katharine would have borne any amount of suffering rather than make it known. She had done all she could; she had asked for advice which, it seemed, would be the wisest she could obtain, and at the very moment when it appeared most needed it had been denied her. It was a harassing, haunting thought. There had been moments when it almost tempted her to distrust the Mercy which was guiding the events of her life; and even when the weak doubt had been battled with and conquered, it left her a prey to a heart-sickness which was far worse than any positive pain. Katharine had believed that her short, business-like note would have brought an immediate reply from Charles Ronaldson, and, with him to help them, she felt that everything would be well. If he approved of John's plans, her own mind would be at rest; if he disapproved, she could not but think that his influence would suffice to induce her brother to relinquish them. This she had allowed to herself, but there was yet something behind, a hope unacknowledged, that perhaps if he were well enough he would come himself; and day after day, as the post failed to bring an answer to her letter, she had reckoned the chances of his arriving by the evening train, or travelling by night, and reaching Rilworth early in the morning, saying to herself at the same time, that it was very improbable, but still it might be. Thus she kept him in her thoughts, and looked to him for comfort in a degree which grievously in-

creased the disappointment as time went by and she heard nothing. At the end of a week she wrote a second time, still as formally as before, and, whilst yet expecting a reply, she entreated her brother to wait before he opened the business to her mother ; but John was by this time under influence directly opposed to hers ; and, urged by his wife and by persons interested in the speculation, he insisted upon keeping to the first agreement.

The result ! — Katharine could not venture to recall it in detail, but it was stamped upon her memory in characters which no time could efface. And she had not been blameless, her temper had failed once. She had spoken harshly, exaggerated the risk, foretold consequences which, after all, might be only the coinage of her own brain ; and the consciousness of her weakness and her sin had met her, as it were, face to face over her mother's dying bed ; for Mrs. Ashton was dying, though by lingering degrees. There was no hope of her rallying and regaining strength, scarcely even of recovering consciousness. Two days after that terrible morning when her mother had a second time been carried senseless to her bed, the answer for which Katharine had so anxiously looked, as at least affording an opening of escape from her perplexities, arrived. She had described it to Mrs. Forbes, — a note from a kind of clerk, saying that her business should be attended to. And this, then, was the end of her trust in Charles Ronaldson's willingness to help ! — The delay of a week, when she had begged urgently for an immediate answer, and a letter not written by himself, but put into the hands of a clerk.

Poor Katharine ! she knew then what the vision was which she had conjured up. The feeling of neglect, of disappointment was maddening. In the bitterness of wounded pride she allowed herself to believe that it would be wrong to force her affairs

upon his notice when he seemed to take so little interest in them; and when again urged by her brother to give a promise which should bind her to enter into his plans, she had taken the sudden resolution of coming herself to London for one day, to consult Colonel Forbes. It was more for John's sake than her own. She believed him to be still unpledged, though his friends were putting temptation in his way; and Henry Madden especially was every day at Moorlands, insisting upon the advantages to be gained by the speculation. Katharine had nothing to bring against it but her own misgivings. The very fact that George Andrews, opposed to her brother as he was in politics, should support it awoke a doubt; and she could not argue, as John did, that because Colonel Forbes hoped it might answer, and used smooth words about the chairman, and spoke of his respect for his estimable friend Mr. Andrews, therefore everything was safe; Colonel Forbes would be only too well pleased to rid himself of John Ashton as a tenant, that Katharine knew quite well. Yet she felt certain he would not do anything dishonourable, and she believed that if questions of fact were asked, they would receive an honest answer. With this belief she went not to consult but to inquire. The object of her visit had failed, but now there was hope still. The little note from Charles Ronaldson might be the means of settling all the discordant opinions. Alas, for Katharine! the comfort had come too late to restore her peace of mind. If he had cared for her, so she said to herself when she began to think, there would have been no delay, and her mother's misery might have been saved. Goaded and bitter were her thoughts whilst she sat by the open window gazing upon the people passing below. Where is loneliness so lonely as in London? On they went, rushing, hurrying,

one after the other,—self-complacent ease, busy respectability, harassing care, abject poverty,—each with its own peculiar aim, each with the burden of its own thoughts,—each, as it seemed, using the mighty city and its gigantic resources, not as an end, but as a means for attaining it. And so there could be no rest, and little sympathy, at least on the surface; and Katharine, as she looked upon them, felt that she also had been caught in the vortex, and, like them, was being borne along by the current of the world's business—to what haven?

That was the sad question. Others doubtless had homes to which they were hastening,—loved friends to whom, when escaped from the turmoil in which they were moving, they might return and find a sweet repose; but Katharine's home was breaking up. A few weeks,—it could scarcely be more,—and the one tie which yet bound her to the joyous days of her childhood would be broken; she would have no one pressing duty, there would be no one to whom she was necessary. And what was to replace that one object—her mother's comfort—which had for so many years been the rule by which she had measured all other claims? When left to choose for herself where she would go, what she would do, for what purpose she would live, how was she to decide? It was a dreary blank which spread before her. A few months before she might have said, that wherever her brother went there would be her home likewise; but circumstances were much changed since then. Hard words, and cold looks, and unjust accusations, separate more widely than any outward circumstances. Katharine might and would have forgiven readily, for she had done little wrong; but Selina's estrangement was of a different character. She who had in reality been the offender was the least likely to forgive; and

John, weak by nature, and rendered intensely irritable, as weak people always are, by a well-grounded opposition, had suffered himself to say things which he could not expect Katharine to forget, and which therefore he never forgot himself. Both were cool to her ; and, whatever might be the future of their lives, Katharine saw plainly that hers could not be united with them. Her father's words again recurred to her,—she was to be the children's friend. That could not be now ; and the tears, which had been scorched by the weariness of a deeper sorrow, coursed each other down Katharine's cheek, as she thought how, if she left Moorlands, she should miss the fond caresses and soft words of the little ones whom for so many months she had been training, as she hoped, for Heaven.

But there was nothing definite in all this ; one thought followed the other irregularly. Katharine could not have borne anything like a fixed consideration of the possible future ; for there was a dark gulf between it and the present moment, watching, and sorrow, and desolation of the heart, and what she might feel, or how she might be enabled to act when actually left to the loneliness which now she dreaded, who could say ? She turned again to Charles Ronaldson's note ; not exactly from interest, though it did interest her ; and after a few seconds she found herself retracing the lines, to see whether there were any signs of weakness, or the remains of illness in the formation of the letters ; but principally, as she thought, to consider what was to be done about it. To miss seeing him again might be throwing away the best, if not the only opportunity she would have of actually talking to him and explaining all her difficulties ; yet to remain absent from her mother so long was a risk which she could not bear to think of.

Should she ask him to come to Moorlands? Pride whispered no; common sense suggested yes. If they were nothing to each other, there could be no reason against it. But then perhaps he might not be able to come; whereas, if she were to stay, she would be certain, humanly speaking, to see him. Her mother might become worse; but then also she might not, and Mr. Fowler had given it as his decided opinion that she was likely to linger for weeks. Still, to leave her, and to find perhaps that Selina had neglected her,—that would be very miserable; but then, again, to discover that if she had only remained, she might have heard something to influence John and perhaps save him from a false and irremediable step! It was a great perplexity. Katharine could only solve it as she had long been accustomed to solve all questions of difficulty, whether involving things of earth or Heaven,—by prayer. And it was not till then that she saw clearly the few rules which in former days she had given herself for guidance in similar cases. One was always, if possible, to keep to an engagement when once made; that decidedly put the balance in favour of departure. She had promised to return, and John and Selina would be expecting her. Another was, in all cases, to choose a *positive* before a *possible* duty. She would certainly be doing right in going back to her mother without delay,—she might only be doing right in waiting to see Charles Ronaldson; and when Katharine had settled these points to the satisfaction of her conscience, she felt, by the sharp though quickly subdued pang of regret which followed, how much, in spite of all pride and disappointment, inclination might have influenced her decision to the contrary.

She went down stairs again to tell her cousin what she had resolved upon, feeling that the communica-

tion might not be agreeable, yet still not quite prepared for the outburst of reproachful entreaties which awaited her.—To think of going back the same afternoon! Such a thing had never been heard of in former days. And what on earth could have induced her to come up, if she wasn't going to stay one night? Mrs. Davis, in her disappointment, could almost have found it in her heart to say, that it was giving a great deal of trouble for nothing; but her good-natured hospitality stood in the way as a check. She contented herself with giving her husband a summons to dinner, in a loud, domestic key, which doubtless was well understood by the meek little man, who immediately answered it; rushing into the room, stumbling over a footstool, nearly upsetting a chair in his near-sighted haste, and putting his face into such close contact with the dishes on the table, in order to see what they contained, that it almost seemed as if, in his delight at the meeting, he was about to favour them with an embrace. "There's no need for that, husband," said Mrs. Davis, approaching the table. "Here's Katharine won't eat, nor drink, nor see anything. We'd as well be without a dinner for any good it will be to her."—"Not quite I hope," said Katharine, good humouredly; "I mean to make a very good dinner, if you don't object, for it is a long time since breakfast."—"Very true, quite true, Cousin Kate. Draw your chair in; and then, Mrs. Davis, we'll just ask a blessing and begin." Mrs. Davis tried to look moody; but it was a very difficult matter, most especially when sitting at the head of her own table doing the honours of some very fine soles,—such soles, as she declared, as never were to be had anywhere out of London, and which she had bought herself that very morning. Mr. Davis suggested that, if there were any more

to be procured of the same kind, Katharine might have a basket made up for her to carry home.—“To be sure she might; that is, if she would only have waited,” was his wife’s reply. “There’s nothing that can’t be had nor done in London, if people will only give time; but how is one to manage when they are off before one has time to look round? Kate’s in such a hurry, I venture to say she’ll be wanting to go before the train.” —“Not quite, cousin,” said Katharine, laughing. “Indeed, I wished to go back by the latest train, because of having some shopping to do; and I meant to ask you, if you had an hour to spare, whether you could have gone out with me, for I was not able to do anything this morning.”

Shopping! almost as great a delight to Mrs. Davis as sight-showing; but her pride would not allow her to acknowledge it.

She put sundry difficulties in the way, and especially objected to the idea of Katharine’s returning to Rilworth so late. “There is a train at seven,” said Katharine.—“Too late,” observed Mr. Davis, gravely. “If you were my child, Cousin Kate, you shouldn’t go.” —“If she had been your child, she would never have thought of going,” said Mrs. Davis. “She would have been brought up differently.” —“I shall be at Rilworth by nine,” said Katharine.—“And what are you to do when you get there?” inquired Mrs. Davis.—“John will be there,” replied Katharine; “I told him I might be back by any train after four, so you see he will be on the look-out for me.” —“All a chance,” said Mrs. Davis. “I know John of old; he will make sure you are coming by the first train, and when he finds you are not there, he’ll put himself in a fuss, and go back to Moorlands; and you’ll find no one at the station to meet you; and it will be pitch dark; and the chances are, not a fly to be had, for

there's few enough at any time at Rilworth station ; and it will be sure to rain cats and dogs, for it's been threatening for it all day ; and then you'll run about after your luggage, and never find it, and two to one but you'll lose it all ; or if you get it, you'll have to walk into Rilworth—and a good quarter of a mile that is—in a pouring rain ; and the end will be, you'll be drenched through and through, and sit in your wet things, and catch your death of cold.”—“ You'd much better stay, Cousin Kate,” said Mr. Davis, who had been listening most dutifully to his wife's prophecies. Katharine shook her head. “ We must be back here by six, I suppose,” she said ; “ and I can have a cab to take me to the station.” Mrs. Davis rang the bell : “ Jenny, there's to be tea ready at half-past five, not a bit later ; remember that, Kate.” And she rose from table, adding, “ Such a flurry as it all is !” But as Katharine felt it more wise to consider all this as an “ aside,” she went upstairs to finish packing her little carpet-bag, and prepare for going out ; whilst Mrs. Davis, grumbling all the time, adjourned to the kitchen, to order something “ nice ” for Katharine's tea, and provide a little basket of dainties, which she fancied might please the children, if they were of no use to any one else.

CHAPTER LIV.

KATHARINE came in from her walk, very tired, about five o'clock. She was not allowed to stay longer, because, as Mrs. Davis said, there would be no time left for tea. Then she had to write a note

to Charles Ronaldson ; which, happily, she had no leisure to think about, and so it flowed fluently and easily ; it merely expressed, however, that she was sorry she could not see him, and that she should like to hear from him as to her brother's business. In the postscript there was the hint—"If you should come to Moorlands, we should all be very glad to see you." This was all she ventured to say, and little though it was, it opened a door which gave her in the distance a gleam of something like comfort. Then came tea, and the necessity of talking and eating, and precisely at half-past six the cab was at the door, and Mr. Davis ready to accompany her to the Paddington station. Many were Cousin Hannah's parting injunctions, given with a kind of surly good-nature, as to the care she was to take of herself, and how she was to be sure and wrap herself up, because the nights grew cold, and especially not to forget to see after the little hamper, and send it back whenever there was an opportunity ; and to remember and let her hear about her poor dear mother. And Mr. Davis was made to repeat twice over the number of parcels. And at last, just as Katharine was stepping into the cab, her little hand-basket was taken from her, and a piece of cake, wrapped up carefully in white paper, was put into it, that she might be quite sure to have something by her, whatever might happen.

They were early at the station ; and Katharine, not liking to keep Mr. Davis, took her place as soon as she could in the railway carriage with a woman who looked like a respectable nurse, and two or three men—all very civil. The carriage was only half-filled ; but she did not expect that comfort to last very long. "The hamper's in the van behind, Cousin Kate," said Mr. Davis ; "you won't forget ? and the little bag you've got with

you." — "Yes, all right, thank you very much," said Katharine. — "And wife bade me be sure and tell you not to trust to the railway people, but to have an eye to the hamper yourself." — "Yes, you may be quite sure of that." — "Well, then, good-bye, and a pleasant journey to you, and a longer stay next time." — "Good-bye, and a great many thanks." Katharine shook hands cordially, watched him till he was out of sight, and then, with the prospect of only silent companionship, felt herself at last able to rest.

The train was late in starting, and it was a long one, and rather slow ; the evening, too, was cloudy, evidently, as Cousin Hannah had prophesied, threatening for rain. It seemed to grow dark uncommonly soon ; or perhaps the indistinctness, and confusion, and rapid succession of all objects on a railway, tended to give the impression. Katharine was so tired, that she became very sleepy, and nothing but the knowledge that if she did not take care of herself no one would do so for her, or warn her when she arrived at her journey's end, would have enabled her to keep even moderately awake. As it was, she managed to have a most remarkable blending of images in her mental vision ; smoking engines and railway porters, Mr. Davis and Cousin Hannah, Colonel Forbes and Jane, with the addition of Crewe and Laurette, forming a species of kaleidoscope, from the review of which she occasionally started up as a stentorian voice called out the names of the different stations, in those marvellous tones peculiar to all railways, whether foreign or English, and which seem to have it peculiarly for their object to perplex and mislead the traveller.

"Room here, sir. Three seats vacant." The face of a railway porter was seen by the glimmering

light of a lamp peering into the carriage. A man wrapped in a travelling cloak was behind him. The door was opened. Katharine was at the other extremity of the carriage, and the person next to her pressed nearer, to make room for the new comer. Katharine was too sleepy to look or move; she did not know whether one, or two, or three persons had entered; all she wished was not to be disturbed herself. But this was not to be granted; again and again the carriage-door opened, and the ominous words "Room, sir," were repeated. Every place was soon occupied; and Katharine, jolted, and squeezed into the smallest space possible, was thoroughly awakened by discomfort. "We are likely to have a bad night, sir," said a stout man at the farther end of the carriage, addressing his neighbour in the cloak who sat opposite to him, on the same side with Katharine. "I am afraid so," was the simple reply; and as Katharine caught the words, she bent eagerly forward, and the words "Oh! Mr. Ronaldson," which escaped her, were lost in the shriek of the railway whistle. The train started noisily and rapidly, for there had been an unusual delay; the few lamps at the station were left rapidly behind; and a crescent moon, appearing at times between fast-flying, angry clouds, was the only light cast upon the surrounding country. Katharine leant back in her seat, her heart faint with disappointment and nervousness. The moment she had spoken the words she felt that she must have been mistaken, it could not have been Charles Ronaldson. She listened again—but a mania for conversation had filled the carriage, and all voices were raised except the one which she longed to hear. Then she sat as far forward as she could, and strained her eyes to catch a glimpse of the face half-hidden by the collar of the cloak; but in the

faint light it was impossible to distinguish it, and at last, in a sudden pause, she heard some one say, "Do you travel far, sir?" The answer was lost, but the rejoinder was spoken more loudly. "I envy you having to go such a short way, we are rather too many for comfort." Katharine felt as if she could bear this no longer. The thought crossed her mind, whether she could ask if it really was Mr. Ronaldson. She was sure he would be as anxious to see her, as she was to see him; putting aside every other consideration, it might save him so much trouble. But the dread of making an awkward mistake held her back. Again the train stopped, there were a few moments of comparative silence, and Katharine, with a feeling of desperation, said as loudly as she could to her opposite neighbour, "Can you tell whether it is raining?" The manœuvre succeeded; her voice caught attention, as she hoped it might, and stretching across his fellow-travellers, Charles Ronaldson exclaimed in surprise, "Miss Ashton, can it possibly be you?" In another minute, notwithstanding the murmuring complaints of the pushed and disturbed individuals, whom he insisted so unceremoniously should just allow him to pass, he was seated next to Katharine. The relief was indescribable, yet as the light from the lamps at the station fell upon his face, Katharine could not help seeing how ill he still looked. He would listen, however, to no question about himself, his whole thought was for her. "You have left London notwithstanding my note," he said, half-reproachfully.—"Yes, I was obliged, my mother is so ill," replied Katharine; "you have heard that, I suppose?"—"No, indeed, I have heard nothing; I have been away in Wales, in Ireland, all kinds of places. It cannot be anything serious, or you would not have left

her.”—“ Another paralytic stroke,” said Katharine, quietly; “ I was obliged to leave her for one day.” “ Another! how terrible! Just now?”—“ No, some days ago! she has rallied; but it is very sad, I can’t tell you more, unless we have time.” He took out his watch: “ Ten minutes only! I am obliged to stop at the next station. Was my note any good to you?”—“ A little, thank you, but I want to hear more. Is the company unsafe?”—“ I could not say that; it is a speculation; it may answer to some, if they have capital and prudence. It will not be safe for John and Henry Madden, they want a wiser head.”—“ And it would not be safe for me to risk anything?” said Katharine.—“ No, certainly not.”—“ Thank you;” there was a pause, Katharine’s heart was very full. She longed to say, “ Why did you not write?” She thought she would ask him to come to Moorlands; she would have given worlds to hear him say how he felt, where he was going, when they would meet again; but she said nothing. And the train rushed on in the darkness, and the precious minutes fled past with yet more terrible swiftness. Already they were half gone. He spoke again; “ You did not think me unkind in not writing?”—“ Not very—that is, I know I was unreasonable, you have so many more pressing claims.”—“ Not before your business. Impossible! Did you really think so?”—“ I did not understand, and I was dreadfully anxious and unhappy,” said Katharine.—He repeated the words; “ Anxious, and unhappy! you did not say so.”—“ I did not like to do so; it did not alter the business, perhaps it was foolish in me.” He put his hand to his forehead, and a heavy sigh escaped him. “ I was away,” he said. “ The first letter was mis-directed.” Katharine started, the idea of such a possibility had never crossed her mind, yet she had sent it very hastily. Charles continued. “ It

reached me after the second ; that too followed me to several places, and was at last sent back to my home. There it was opened by mistake, and my clerk wrote an answer. You said you were unhappy?"—"Yes, but I would rather not think of it," replied Katharine; "and I am not unhappy now, at least, not in the same way." There was something in the tone in which this was said, that betrayed more of Katharine's real feelings than she was at all aware of, and Charles took up her words, and said in a low, eager voice, "Not in the same way! Did you really then care so much?"—"A great deal depended upon my hearing. I could not help caring." Katharine became very confused, and the train stopped. "You get out here, I think, sir," said a stout gentleman, anxious to free his legs from the "durance vile" in which they had been placed in such crowded company. Charles put his hand upon the door; but turned again to Katharine, and speaking in the same tone, heard only by her, said, "I have told you little about business; shall I write?"—"Yes, to John, that will do most good." He looked very blank. "You have not forgiven me, I see."—"Forgiven you—oh, yes, twenty times over, if there was anything to forgive." Still he seemed dissatisfied; he made a few more inquiries for her mother, and then jumped out of the carriage, but lingered by the door-way; Katharine's hand rested there, and, as it seemed almost involuntarily, his was laid upon it. There was a slight movement, as if she would have drawn back, yet the impulse was not followed. He looked at her for an instant fixedly, in the glimmering light; his face was pale with agitation. "Miss Ashton, Katharine," and he bent forward, and his voice sank to a whisper, "may I see you at Moorlands?" Katharine's eyes

met his, and then they sank again. It was a scarcely audible, "Yes;" but he heard it, and with one quick tremulous, "Thank you from my heart," they parted.

CHAPTER LV.

FOUR more days of painful discussion — contradictory arguments — harsh accusations, mingled with watching which never slumbered, and exertion which never dared grow weary; and on the morning that succeeded, Katharine knew that a brief interval of consciousness had been restored to her mother, in preparation, as it seemed, for that long last sleep which was to bring her to rest for ever. The change had come rapidly and unexpectedly, after a disturbed night, in which Katharine had felt well nigh exhausted. What it portended she too well knew, but even with that knowledge it was full of a peaceful refreshment to her spirits; for her mother lay like a weary child, simple, humble, and trusting; all the bitterness of the past forgotten, its memory blotted out, and the love which had blessed her children from their infancy, pouring itself forth again in the fulness of its gentle tenderness. Those were hours of great peace, when Katharine sat by the bedside, her hand clasped in her mother's, speaking to her as she could bear it, from time to time, in the words of Scripture, and occasionally reverting to her few earthly cares for herself, or John, or the children, — or hearing the assurances, so often repeated, yet ever new in their comfort, that she had herself been her mother's blessing on earth, and the instrument to lead her to heaven. But dearer yet was the holy service in which all joined as evening

drew near, and the consciousness that the prayers which were breathed so audibly by dying lips were those which now for many years had been the secret, daily petitions of comparative health. If Katharine had ever been inclined to murmur at the painful circumstances which had preceded her mother's illness, she felt now that all was abundantly repaid. The peace of Mrs. Ashton's last moments shed its influence over those which followed, and when towards the dawn of the following morning she breathed her last, her children turned with one consent from the kiss laid on the cold marble forehead to the warm living embrace, in which, for the time, every angry word was forgotten. And there was a peaceful week succeeding—most mournful indeed, and at times unspeakably desolate; yet with much to soften its bitterness, even to Katharine. Business was never reverted to, and scarcely thought of, and even the reading of Mrs. Ashton's will did not, as Katharine had feared, tend to bring it forward. What might have been the case if the distribution of the property had been different, Katharine did not distress herself by thinking. John at least had now nothing to complain of; an equal division was made of the whole, and if Katharine found herself in possession of about seven hundred pounds, when it was her father's intention that she should have had at least a thousand, the change was accepted without comment, and apparently without disappointment. But these halcyon days were not to last; Katharine, even while thankful for them, was aware that it could not be expected. The storm which had threatened to burst could not so suddenly have passed away, and though she felt quietly trusting in looking to the future, it certainly was not because she did not anticipate trial. Whether she could have looked forward as calmly without the thought of

Charles Ronaldson, it may be scrutinising too carefully to inquire. She had received one note from him since her mother's death ; it reached her on the day of the funeral, and there was no business in it, except the offer to transact any of hers which lay within his reach. He had hoped, he said, most earnestly, to have been able to attend at the funeral, but finding this impossible, he could not resist sending one line ; not with the idea of comforting her (he did not feel that he had the right to offer her comfort), but only to make her feel that he thought of her. This was all, but it was very soothing to Katharine. She even blamed herself for deriving from it more consolation than was right. It seemed in some ways to take the place of Higher support ; but there was a dull vacant blank in her life, and even the glimmering of a faint hope that something might yet be given her to fill it was indescribably precious. The few words which had passed between them, had indeed expressed but little,—there was nothing tangible to dwell upon ; but she scarcely wished that there should be. She had no heart for another affection at that moment ; it would have struck her as an insult to the mother's love of which she had just been deprived. But she could not be mistaken in the consciousness that his interest in her was unaltered, and this she felt gave her, in a manner, a right to his care, a claim upon his advice and protection, which were all that in the bewilderment of her new grief she was conscious of requiring.

The wakening from the dreamy maze of sorrow to the perception of the claims of definite duty, came quickly and suddenly. A few days after the funeral Katharine was sitting one afternoon, as was her wont, in the garden at work, feeling a relief in the rapid yet monotonous motion of her fingers, which

gave her the idea of active employment, whilst setting her mind free to range at will. She was thinking of her mother, and her young days,—travelling again in memory the beaten track of life, from its first commencement,—not wishing to pass over it again, still less venturing to pursue in imagination its winding course into the future, but lingering over it thankfully, as she read the lesson of trust which it was formed to teach.

John and Selina were in the garden also, and they came and sat down by her, and said a few words kindly and with consideration; John at least did, and Selina was not contradictory. Katharine encouraged them to remain, for she was willing to seize every occasion which might prove that the newly established peace between them was not, on her part, about to be voluntarily broken. They talked upon some indifferent subjects, principally little things concerning the farm. Katharine remarked that they both had rather an abstracted manner, but this seemed natural under the circumstances. She fancied that they, like herself, could not really feel much interest in anything just then, though they might think it right to endeavour after it. Presently, Selina said carelessly, turning her head away from Katharine, and looking towards Maplestead, “I suppose you know, Kate, that Mrs. Forbes is expected home either to-day or to-morrow?” —“Home! to-day!” repeated Katharine, and a thrill of pleasure made her feel how much the darkness of her “trial hour of woe” might be lightened by what she would feel to be hearty sympathy. “So the dairy-maid said this morning when she came over to ask if we had any milk to spare,” said Selina. —“And Colonel Forbes says the same,” observed John, rather awkwardly, as he took a letter out of his pocket. Katharine’s heart beat very quickly;

these were the old times returned, but one weight was gone, and though she did not dwell upon the thought of what was coming, or allow herself to consider how it might act upon the future of her life, it would have been impossible, after all she had gone through, not to feel thankful that there was no one but herself to shrink from the "evil to come." "Did the dairy-maid know at all how Mrs. Forbes is?" she said, shrinking instinctively from the subjects associated with the letter.—"Very bad," replied Selina, in the same careless tone; "her doctor has ordered her out of London, and from what they say it's high time."—"Colonel Forbes says she is not well," said John, again rather ostentatiously displaying the letter.—Katharine was obliged to take notice of it then. "I did not know you had heard from him," she said. "You never told me."—"Because," and John hesitated, and folded the letter most carefully into squares, making every edge meet, "you see, Kate, it's no use to worry you about things you don't like, and which can't be helped."—"Things which must be," interposed Selina.—"It may be better I should know them," said Katharine.—"Oh! know them of course you must, and so must every one in time; but I should not like you to think we were hurrying matters."—"Only that when things can't be helped," again repeated Selina. "They had better be told at once," said Katharine, quietly.—"Well then"—John looked at his wife, and stopped.—"John, what a coward!" exclaimed Selina, half angrily, "it will not kill her; we are going to Australia in six weeks, that's all."—Katharine was perfectly silent; but all colour forsook her cheek, and she worked with desperate energy.—John caught her hand—"Stop, Katharine, and tell us what you think of it."—"It's very quick, John, dear," said Katharine, trying to speak calmly, but

the effort failed ; a sense of overwhelming change and desolation came over her, and tears fell fast and bitterly. John was very much touched. "I did not think you would have felt it so much, Kitty," he exclaimed, as he kissed her.—"You have often said it would end in that, and you never seemed to want us to stay," said Selina, reproachfully. — "Hush ! Selly, hush !—it's not now as bad as it would have been, Kate ;" an apology which at the moment only served to make Katharine's tears flow faster.—"There's no need for it to be bad at all," said Selina ; "every one tells us we shall be sure to make a fortune."—"But there has been no time to arrange about it," said Katharine ; "six weeks !—how can everything be settled so quickly ?"—Why, as to that, Kitty," said John, "it has not been quite so quick as you seem to think ; when people have been planning for long beforehand, they can easily work everything up at the end." There was an inconsistency in this to Katharine. John had always before talked to her as if all his plans were vague : now he seemed to say they had long been determined upon, but there had been so much insincerity in many ways lately, that she was not surprised, though certainly pained. "I wish you would explain things a little more clearly to me, John," she said, "because I never quite know how much I am to depend upon." John's face showed some confusion of feeling. "If you were one of us, Kitty," he said, "there would be nothing to explain ; but as you have always put your face so decidedly against us, it was natural enough that we should keep our own counsel."—"And the land is actually bought?" inquired Katharine, remembering, with almost a terror, Charles Ronaldson's warning.—"Yes," replied Selina, taking up the answer, "but that is nothing new. It has been as good as bought for some weeks.

There is nothing new except that, instead of leaving it all to Henry Madden to manage, we mean to go out and manage it ourselves.”—“With the Moorlands farming stock to help us, and some ready money in our pockets,” added John. “As to Moorlands, Colonel Forbes is only too glad to put it into other hands; that of course I know, and George Andrews’ cousin will take the remainder of my lease off my hands.” Then everything had been considered and was settled; Katharine felt utterly bewildered. She could only repeat Charles Ronaldson’s opinion, and beg that he might be consulted. Both John and Selina smiled. “What is the use of consulting a man after the deed is done?” said John. “I confess to being like you, Kitty, a little frightened at first; but I have talked it over with George Andrews and Jenkins, and seen Colonel Forbes’ opinion. You know you told me yourself, that he considers it a good investment; and after all, it does seem to me I should be a fool to draw back merely because Charlie Ronaldson (who, between you and me, is rather a stick in these matters) chooses to say that Henry Madden and I want some one else to advise us. If that is all, we may be able to find twenty men if we want them.”—“And you really have been pledged to go for so long?” inquired Katharine, reverting to that part of the subject which rested almost more unpleasantly on her mind than any other.—“Well, yes, pledged in a certain way. You see, George Andrews is a shareholder, and it was a matter of importance to him to give the thing a good push at the beginning, and so to oblige him, I undertook a certain portion; that was just when Jenkins came down to Rilworth. Andrews quite understood I could not be expected to pay down ready money at once, but it was easily managed when he knew what I was sure of having before

very long ; though of course it would have been better if the thing could have been done outright. It would have saved me a matter of some pounds in the way of interest, because, as it was, George Andrews himself advanced some of the money.”—Katharine felt most uncomfortable ; this, then, was the reason why her mother had been so mercilessly urged. John had pledged and embarrassed himself incautiously, and then seen that it would be for his advantage to rest the burden upon her. “I don’t know why you are to look so black about it all, Kate,” said Selina, observing the expression of Katharine’s countenance ; “there is no harm done to any one.” Katharine was silent,—“I don’t take it kind of you, Kitty,” began John ; but Katharine stopped him, “Dear, dear John ! we won’t, please, say anything about kind or unkind. Let it all go—the past—we can’t help it, or make it better. If I was cross, you shall forgive me ; only will you, please, be quite open ; quite open,” she repeated again, “in everything for the time to come. I get so confused fancying, that perhaps there may be something still behind.”—“It is very hard to be suspected,” began Selina, but John would not let her continue. He was touched by Katharine’s gentleness, and owned with something of self-reproach, that he had not been quite straightforward, adding, however, as an excuse, that he had known it would frighten his poor mother if she was told suddenly that he had bought Australian land, and so he had fancied it better to bring both her and Katharine round to the notion by degrees. The apology was very unsatisfactory, as much so as the arrangement with Henry Madden, which he almost instantly afterwards began to explain with the nervous determination of a man who has a very bad case, but is resolved not to confess it. Henry

Madden, it seemed, considered that the shop had been a bad speculation, and that he had been so very ill-used, and was now wishing to exchange Katharine's annual claim for a very small sum, which was to set him quite free and enable him to carry on his plans without encumbrance. "I did think," observed John, as, after some circumlocution, he managed to make the plan clear to his sister, "that it might have been better to give you a claim upon his profits in Australia; but he said himself, that he would rather wipe his hands of the whole thing, it had always been a burden upon him, and he was sure it would be better for you in the end if I could only make you see it."—Katharine felt that this might be quite true, but she saw in a moment that her income at the present time must in consequence be seriously diminished. That, however, was not the painful thought; if she could see Charles Ronaldson, she might talk to him, and he would help to put that right for her. But one word of hearty affection from John, one affectionate wish that she could share their home wherever it might be, would have made her overlook every hasty word or even act of injustice; and there was nothing of the kind. Through all this long conversation, she had been put aside as if in no way concerned in anything which was of importance to them. Her refusal to share in the speculation had, it seemed, so entirely alienated them from her, that they could leave her alone in the hour of sorrow, and scarcely give a thought as to what would become of her. John did indeed say once, "You know, Kitty, there is no good in talking to you of Australia, because you are so set against it;" but this was literally the only allusion he made to the possibility of her accompanying them. Katharine knew quite well to whom this was to be attributed, and one of those

painful rushes of memory which come to us all in seasons of disappointment, brought back forcibly the days when she had been first in her home, first in some way in the affections of every member of her family—"The sunshine of the parlour," as her father had fondly named her; "My great comfort," as Mrs. Ashton was wont to describe her; and "Darling little Kitty," as John always called her whenever he wished her to grant him a favour. Oh! the bitterness of the change! the exceeding loneliness of heart! Katharine did not want to ask or hear more. She hastily took up her work and left John and Selina to congratulate themselves that now Kate was told, the worst was over.

CHAPTER LVI.

ABOUT half-past six o'clock that same evening, Katharine Ashton might be seen crossing the little path which led from the Moorlands Lane through the park of Maplestead. It was a warm, still, grey evening, almost oppressive in its sultriness, and such as insensibly takes its hue from the human heart; an evening that in childhood would give bright dreams of the warm morrow of pleasure, and in youth might make us feel the luxury of repose, without any thought of satiety; but which in middle age would seem only the visible expression of those sobering words of the Preacher: "I have seen all the works that are done under the sun, and behold all is vanity and vexation of spirit."

Katharine Ashton, though still young, had full cause now to realise this truth; the dark night of

sorrow which had hidden both the present and the future from her gaze, and sent her back to the dreams of the past, was vanishing, but the morning stealing upon it was colder and sadder than grief. She was to live, for years it might be, and she was to labour,—that was the appointed duty of man; but she was to live for herself,—to labour for her own approbation,—so at least she allowed herself to think. Sincere, earnest though she was, she had not yet learnt that it is possible to replace family ties by the larger affections of Christianity, or to labour for the Eye of God alone as cheerfully and unweariedly as for the fond smile and the cheering gratitude of an earthly parent. And so now, when all the interests to which she had clung through life, seemed suddenly to have forsaken her, the glance which she cast around her seemed to reveal merely the claims of duties which might or might not be acknowledged, and affections which had lost their charm because there was nothing binding to render them lasting. She could, at that moment, have loved anything which bore the stamp of relationship, however really uncongenial; whilst she could scarcely arouse in herself even a feeling of interest in those who, whilst the ties of blood had been left untouched, were her most cherished friends.

The necessity of loving, not the choice, it was, for which her heart was yearning, and bitterly did she reproach herself with her inconsistency as she felt that not even the love of Jane Forbes, tried by years, and cemented by sorrow, could in the least make amends for the thought that John had learnt to live happily without her, and that Selina could take the children from her without, as it seemed, a regret for the fond care which would be lost to them.

True, there was another link between her and the

prospect of earthly joy; but strange to say, it had suddenly ceased to be tangible. As the love of her own family forsook her, all other love became for the time unreal. She thought over her interview with Charles Ronaldson, and smiled in derision at herself for having ventured to build upon it a future of happiness. What had he done, or said, or looked, that she should believe he felt more for her than the sympathy of old and tried friendship might demand? What was there in his note which any one who had known her in childhood might not have written also? In the desolation of her heart she put aside the thought of his affection as a mocking comfort, and steeling herself against what she considered to be a weak and vain hope, resolved to face life in its loneliness and learn what were to be its duties.

Hers was no solitary trial. At that very moment hundreds on earth must have been learning the same hard lesson,—happy if, like her, they could place themselves where only it can be mastered—at the feet of Jesus. Katharine prayed long and fervently for mercy on her weakness, for strength and guidance, and then in her nervous wretchedness unable to think quietly without moving, wandered forth into the park of Maplestead, with a half-formed intention of calling to inquire for Jane, but without any idea of seeing her. She kept at a considerable distance from the house, and fancied herself quite safe from interruption, but after a little time she observed two gentlemen crossing the park from the carriage road, and as they drew nearer, she saw they were Colonel Forbes and Mr. Reeves. Katharine could not turn back without rudeness, or at least without appearing as though she fancied herself an intruder; and this, after the many permissions which had been granted her to walk in the park whenever she chose, she

did not wish to acknowledge. She went on, hoping they might turn in another direction, but they came straight towards her, in the direction of Moorlands, talking earnestly, and neither of them saw her until they were about a hundred yards from her. Colonel Forbes was the first to perceive her, and his first impulse evidently was to turn back, but Mr. Reeves drew him on, and they both came up to Katharine and shook hands—Colonel Forbes as if he did not like it, but could not help himself; Mr. Reeves with that hearty sympathising pressure which says what words would fail to express. Then Colonel Forbes made a hurried apology and turned back. Mr. Reeves looked a little doubtful whether he ought not to accompany him, till a glance at Katharine's face seemed to retain him. "Are you going far?" he asked.—"I meant to have walked to the house," said Katharine, scarcely able to utter even these simple words from the oppression of her feelings.—"You would not have seen Mrs. Forbes," observed Mr. Reeves.—"I was afraid not, sir, but I thought I would just go and inquire, I did not like to ask Colonel Forbes."—"She is very ill, indeed," was the short reply, and then Mr. Reeves turning suddenly into another path added, "Are you inclined to come with me this way?"—Katharine went with him, and they walked on for some steps in silence. He seemed as if he had something weighing on his mind.—"I was coming to Moorlands," he said, "and Mrs. Reeves would have come with me, if she had been well enough for the walk. She sent you her kind love."—"It is very good of her, sir," said Katharine, but her manner was almost cold. She was thinking of Jane, and longing to see her.—"Many people feel for you, and would comfort you, if they could, Katharine," continued Mr. Reeves, still dwelling upon what he imagined

to be the natural cause of Katharine's constraint of manner.—“Thank you, sir,” repeated Katharine, again, “they are all very good to me. Did you say that Mrs. Forbes was very ill?”—“That is the servants' account. Colonel Forbes says she has had a sharp attack, but he is not alarmed.”—“I would rather believe the servants,” said Katharine, quickly.—“So would I too; they see things with a less prejudiced eye: at any rate she has come back from London quickly.”—“I think she would see me if I were to go to her at once,” said Katharine.—“Would you be admitted?”—“I might be,” and Katharine stopped, as if meaning to turn again to the house.—“And you cannot spare me five minutes?” said Mr. Reeves, a little reproachfully.—“Oh! yes, sir, fifty if you wish it. I can stay as long as ever I like;” and the burning tears which she had been trying to repress coursed each other down Katharine's cheek, as she remembered that there was no one now to say, “Oh! Kate, how I have missed you!”—“I had a little talk with your brother this afternoon, Katharine,” continued Mr. Reeves.—“Had you, sir? Then you know he is going to Australia?” Katharine said this in a tone of perfect quietness; and Mr. Reeves answered in the same way, “And you are going with him, I suppose.”—“Oh! no, no, sir, never,” and Katharine stopped short in her eagerness, and again repeated, “never.”—“I am very glad of that; yet you will be terribly wanted.”—“I think not, sir. I might only be in the way, or they would find it so; I fancy at least Selina would.”—“And they have not asked you?”—“They knew I should not like it,” was Katharine's evasive answer.—Mr. Reeves looked pained. “Then what shall you do, Katharine?”—“I don't know, sir.”—“But have you not thought? have you no wishes?”—Katharine felt as if her heart would

break, but she managed to answer, "None."—You will have," said Mr. Reeves, after the pause of a few seconds.—"Yes, if I could see duties anywhere," said Katharine.—"One duty brings another, begin the first and the second will follow."—"I don't see any first yet," said Katharine.—"The duty of being resigned to do no duties, that may be the first," observed Mr. Reeves.—"That is very hard for me when I have always had so many," said Katharine.—"You may be about to have many more," replied Mr. Reeves, "only they may be spread over a wider circle."—"And I may not be able to see them," said Katharine.—"But you must, if you place yourself in the right position. The children of God's family can never be without duties in this world."—Katharine did not reply, and he went on: "That notion of a family,—of God's family I mean, and of having work for them, we have often talked of before. It is not imaginative; it is the truest, most real tie of any, and stronger and more comforting too, if we would let it have its influence."—"It is vague to me, I am afraid," said Katharine.—"Vague only till we begin to act. Think of all those expressions of servants, working for, watching, waiting for their Lord; and the higher blessedness given us, the title of friends, of children. If Christianity is anything but a vain dream, those words must have a literal meaning, and imply actual relationships and consequent duties."—"Reason says so," replied Katharine, "but I cannot feel it now."—"Because the earthly tie has been so mixed up with the heavenly, that the rending of the one seems to be the destruction of the other."—"Not quite, I hope, sir," said Katharine. "I am very weak and ungrateful I know, but I do not think I could ever content myself without doing something for God. But it seems very difficult and sad to have to choose."—"Per-

haps that is your mistake, Katharine," said Mr. Reeves. "The thinking that you are an independent being, left alone in the world, and at liberty to choose, instead of an ignorant child waiting to be taught."—"I would wish to be taught," replied Katharine, humbly.—"But if the lesson is delayed, you would exercise your own reason."—"It would seem right to do so," answered Katharine.—"That may be a fatal error," replied Mr. Reeves. "You have read, Katharine, of the mode in which the Red Indians in the American forests follow the trail of those whom they are pursuing, catching at every indication of the path, marking the bent twigs, or the half-effaced footprints on the grass, and even the tiny thread of a dress caught in the brambles; so must we oftentimes in life be contented to abide and search in the very spot where we are left for the very faintest indications of the path by which God would lead us onwards to Heaven. Some such there are always to be seen. The trail of our duties may be often perplexed and intricate, or it may for awhile appear absolutely to have failed; but it is never so really, and if we will but follow the very least claim which definitely presents itself, we may be quite sure that the Mercy of God will soon enlarge our sight, and place us in the sphere for which we are intended. If, on the contrary, we content ourselves with searching for even the highest *possible* duty, whilst we neglect even the very smallest *positive* one, we shall infallibly be led into interminable error. You may see it, if you watch," he continued; "you may see persons, both men and women, clever, ingenious in argument, professing the highest principles, standing at some doubtful point in life, reasoning upon great duties, and at the same time omitting some very trifling ones; and if you follow their course in life, it will be

through years of perplexity, all resulting from the first false step, which could never be retraced. Many things will lead to this," he added. "Impatience of doubt, energy of mind, amongst others. People cannot wait to be told ; or if they do wait for a time, they are fretted because the duty to which they are called is so simple. Like Naaman, when told to wash in the waters of Jordan, they turn away, desiring rather the command to do some great thing."—"Will that be my case?" asked Katharine, with the simplicity of one who felt that the judgment of a person who had known her intimately, for so many years, would be more likely to be true than any which she might form of herself.—"It would be the natural fault of your circumstances," he replied, "and I think it would belong to your character. Activity of mind has its own peculiar snare and its own special trial."—"I have felt that," said Katharine, "it is as difficult for me to sit still as it is for many other persons to act."—"Yes, I was sure of that ; and so when I heard of your brother's plans and found that you were not included in them, I felt at once how painful it would be to you to be thus suddenly, as it were, thrown out of employment, and I could not help fearing that you might be in consequence entirely dispirited, or tempted to form some scheme without mature deliberation."—"Then John said nothing to you, sir, about my going with them?" inquired Katharine.—"He alluded to it in a way. He said that you were unfortunately opposed to his notions ! But you would not like to go, should you, Katharine?"—"No," exclaimed Katharine ; and the quick remembrance of all she might lose if she did go gave energy to the word ; "but I should like to have been asked."—"You would have been placed in a great perplexity then. It would have been the

suggestion of a duty.”—“I did not think of that before,” said Katharine.—“No, it is all best as it is ; yet I do think they might have thought of me.”—“Try and put the thought aside,” said Mr. Reeves, “or what, perhaps, may be more wise, face it, by putting yourself in their position. The more their hearts are bent upon the plan, the more they would dislike the idea of having a person with them who disapproved of it : and remember these are but early days ; your brother has scarcely had time to think upon what he intends to do himself.”—“Yet he must sail in six weeks, so he says,” replied Katharine. — Mr. Reeves looked rather startled. “That is very quick,” he remarked. “It would seem impossible to settle everything in such a very short time.”—“Mr. Andrews will help,” said Katharine ; “in fact, I believe he has long been putting things in train. He is too clever not to have seen that he was certain to gain his point with John at last.”—“And you stay with them till they go, of course ?” said Mr. Reeves.—“I suppose so, sir, but I had not thought particularly about it.”—“You had not thought particularly about anything, I imagine,” continued Mr. Reeves.—“No, sir ; I do not seem to care, except for the children,” she added, whilst tears glistened in her eyes.—“Well, then,” said Mr. Reeves, “may I give you one or two little pieces of advice ? One is to look upon this feeling of not caring as a fault ; a natural one perhaps, but still a fault, and like all other faults, to be conquered, first by prayer, then by action. We were not sent into the world to be indifferent, and one of the temptations of sorrow is that it makes us so.”—“But I cannot see what I am to do,” observed Katharine.—“Follow the trail of your duties, and specially guard against impatience if it should be perplexed. Can you be any use to your brother ?”

—"Yes," replied Katharine, "great use, but that will soon be over."—"God will provide," said Mr. Reeves; "we need work only for the day. Business and interest then are prepared for you for the next six weeks."—"Business certainly," replied Katharine.—"And interest too, more than you think, unless you are very strangely altered."—"And after that?" said Katharine.—"After that I do most confidently believe that something will be pointed out to you by a sure indication. If it should not be so, there are certain guiding posts which will always help us and prevent our being left to the misery of choice as to our road. Where we are we had better remain, unless actually called upon to move. Rillworth will have a greater claim upon you than any other place."—"Certainly, and I could not bear to go away from it," said Katharine, "though my life must be very changed now."—"Then old friends are a great tie."—"Yes, indeed;" and Katharine thought of Jane, and wondered that the possibility of leaving her could ever have crossed her mind.—"The work you have been accustomed to will be better than new work," continued Mr. Reeves.—"The district, you mean?" said Katharine.—"Yes, work amongst the poor. So far," he added, "you have at this moment some hints given you; but I have not a question in my own mind that they will eventually be made clearer, if only you will not throw yourself into confusion by missing any duty which presents itself. I should say, for instance, that if you were to be impatient now, and leave your brother, because things are not quite comfortable with him, and you desire at once to have a home of your own, you would be making a great mistake; or if you were to sit down and form an ideal of the life you would wish to live, and then look round the world to see where it could best be

carried out, you would certainly blunder ; or if even you were to plan the kind of work which you considered best for your own mind, you would almost infallibly err. Circumstances which put duties in our way, those are the things to be attended to, only with one most earnest caution, that if we put aside a duty, and then enter upon what may seem to us a definite path, we commit an error at the beginning, and shall most unquestionably suffer for it." They were drawing near the house at Maplestead, and Mr. Reeves paused, and said, "I have given you what some people would call sorry comfort, Katharine ; but practical people require practical help. I think you understand why I have spoken in this way, when there must be other thoughts so much nearer your heart."—"I can deal with them myself," said Katharine.—"Yes, there is consolation for them in every word of the Bible, and I knew you would have sought and found it. Earthly perplexities are the things which sharpen the keen edge of sorrow."—Katharine stood for a moment looking up at the windows of the house. Jane's room fronted that way, and all the blinds were down. "I like to think," she said, "that old friendship is a tie of duty ; that Maplestead is not merely a romance to me."—Mr. Reeves turned to her very quickly : "Duty," he said ; "yes, the greatest possible duty. Katharine, she needs all the help that you can give her." The words seemed to escape him involuntarily. Katharine had never before heard any allusion so direct. She longed to ask him how much he knew—whether the expression implied a suspicion of Jane's unhappiness, or only of her illness ; but he seemed conscious of having betrayed more than he had intended, and in his usual quick and almost cold way, he shook hands suddenly, and left her.

CHAPTER LVII.

KATHARINE went round to the back door to inquire for Mrs. Forbes ; she was often in the habit of doing so, when wishing to avoid Colonel Forbes, or, as was now the case, too late to see Jane. Her appearance this evening, however, seemed rather *mal à propos*; there was a sound of scuffling feet, and angry voices, amongst which Mademoiselle Laurette's was very audible, and Katharine was kept so long without an answer that she was induced at length to make her way to the housekeeper's room. It was a cheerful, airy apartment, far enough from the kitchen to be out of the way of interruption, and Katharine had spent many quiet half-hours there when waiting to see Jane, or managing little matters of parish business with Mrs. Brown. She knocked at the door with the easy confidence of a person who is quite sure of a kind welcome, but the housekeeper's "Come in!" was a little hasty, and Katharine on entering found herself in the presence not only of Mrs. Brown, but of Mr. Crewe, who was standing by the window with an air of supreme composure and self-approbation, apparently giving his testimony upon some important subject.—"Good evening, Miss Ashton. Mr. Crewe, be so good as to set a chair for Miss Ashton," and Crewe slowly stepped forward, and placed the chair, and then as slowly went back to his position. "I came to inquire for Mrs. Forbes," said Katharine; "I was afraid it would be rather late to ask to see her."—"Mrs. Forbes is in a slight degree fatigued with her journey," replied Crewe, as if the question could only be addressed to himself; "but it was a short time; we always travel per express."—"Mrs. Forbes would be a great deal better if people would only let her stay quiet in one place,"

said the housekeeper, angrily. "What can be more tiring than being whisked through the air thirty miles an hour? One might as well be a bird."—"Different people have different opinions, Mrs. Brown," observed Crewe; "for my part there's nothing more to my taste, provided only my company's agreeable." He said this with rather a marked emphasis, and the housekeeper observed, shortly, that agreeable company was rare enough in this world.—"Very rare; nothing more so, Mrs. Brown. Have you any commands for Rilworth? The Colonel wishes me to ride in with a letter for to-morrow's early post."—"You would not attend to my commands, if they were given, Mr. Crewe," was the reply; "so there's little need for me to trouble myself with telling them; though you might as well call at the chemist's with that prescription for your mistress."—"Mrs. Forbes' prescription did you say?" said Crewe, doubtfully.—"Mrs. Forbes—your mistress's prescription," repeated the housekeeper quickly.—"Oh! Mrs. Forbes' prescription, I will endeavour to remember;" and bowing majestically to Katharine, Crewe departed.—"If that is not airified, I don't know what is," exclaimed the housekeeper, as soon as he had left the room; "and it's the upsetting of the house, and the turning of everything topsy turvy; and I can't abide it. Did you ever, now, Miss Ashton, see a fellow like that?"—"Not often," replied Katharine, with a smile; "but he does not come much in your way, I suppose, Mrs. Brown?"—"Not come in my way! I should like to know if he does not come in the way of every one in the house. Why he's quite master, you know," she added, lowering her voice.—"I should not have thought Colonel Forbes would have allowed any one to be master but himself," said Katharine.—"He would not if he knew it," said Mrs. Brown; "but it's not

the less true that he does not know it ; and I can tell you what, Miss Ashton, if there's any one wants a thing done in this house, why they'd best turn to Crewe, let it be what it may. There's more things behind the scenes in great houses than you'd dream of, and, between ourselves—but there, won't you sit down now and take a cup of tea ? It will be up in a minute." Katharine would fain have excused herself, but Mrs. Brown's hospitality would not be denied. Rejoicing in the thought of a little comfortable gossip, she drew a small round table to the window, took out of her closet a pot of choice preserves, and, ringing the bell, gave directions that tea for two should be made ready directly, adding, as she placed a chair for Katharine, "There now, we'll just sit down and be snug." Katharine cared little for the snugness, but she did care a great deal to hear anything that could be told her about Jane, and she was just beginning to ask some questions which might lead to further explanation, when the door burst open, and Laurette rushed into the room, her black eyes sparkling, her hair in disorder, and her little French cap scarcely resting on her head. She was closely followed by Crewe. "He is a poltron, a liar, a what-d'ye-call, a wretch," she exclaimed, turning round to the door, and almost thrusting her clenched hand into Crewe's face. Crewe drew back and quietly folded his arms. "Un méchant ! un poltron !" again ejaculated Laurette. "Point de pitié ! Ah ! pauvre madame !"—"You'd best go back to her, Laurette," said the housekeeper, "it's only making a fool of yourself standing here."—A bell rang violently. "Your mistress wants you, Mamselle Laurette," said Crewe, coolly.—"My mistress ? ah ! méchant ! poltron !" and Laurette still stood, shaking her hand threateningly at Crewe.—"What is all this folly, Mr. Crewe ?" asked the housekeeper,

angrily.—“Mamselle has a fancy for making me a common carrier, that’s all,” replied Crewe, in the same imperturbable tone; “there’s your bell again, Mamselle.”—Laurette looked as if she could have struck him, but not one step did she move.—“I shan’t be back till after supper, Mrs. Brown,” said Crewe; “you’ll have some put by for me.”—“If there’s any left, Mr. Crewe,” muttered the housekeeper, as he withdrew slowly, and perfectly unmoved.—“Come, Mamselle, we don’t want you here;” but Laurette, instead of listening to the injunction, only threw herself into a chair, and began to rock herself helplessly backwards and forwards, interspersing her abuse of Crewe with piteous lamentations for “pauvre madame,” whose bell now rang for the third time.—“If it’s not too bad!” exclaimed the housekeeper, “why she might be dead and buried before such a fool would be any good. Mamselle! don’t you hear? Three times that bell’s rung.”—“Let me go,” said Katharine; but she had scarcely spoken the word, when Laurette started up, and with a fierce look of indignation rushed away.—“And that’s what they call the best lady’s maid to be had in all London!” said the housekeeper contemptuously, as she closed the door and bolted it carefully, and then replaced herself at the table.—“Now, would you believe it, Miss Ashton, that we have had those scenes two and three times a day for the last month?”—“No, certainly, I should not have believed it,” said Katharine; “I should have supposed the case would have been easily settled by sending Mademoiselle Laurette about her business.”—“And getting another just like her,” said Mrs. Brown; “why, Miss Ashton, the trouble those ladies’ maids have been to me, and the fuss to my poor mistress, is more than words can tell; and all owing to that fellow Crewe, with his stiff tie and set-up manner. You see,”—

and she drew her chair confidentially near to Katharine—"you see, Miss Ashton, there are a good many of ins and outs in a house of this kind; and if things aren't quite straight at the top, why it's not so reasonable to suppose they'll be straight at the bottom; and there's none quicker than servants at finding this out; and when 'tis found out, there's a want of what should be, and folks will go their own way spite of all you can say to them."—Katharine was accustomed to Mrs. Brown's mysteries, but the drift of her present observations was not quite distinct enough to enable her to reply to them.—"An ounce of common sense! that's what's wanted," continued the housekeeper, despairingly; "but where to look for it is more than I can say; and now my poor lady is so ill, she's not able to look into things more than a baby; and the Colonel listens just to what Mr. Crewe says, and nobody else is able to put in a word. No, Miss Ashton, it's not a place to be envied, I can tell you, is that of overseer of all the goings on in a great house; and when things aren't straight at the top, as I said, there's no reason to expect they'll be straight at the bottom; so it's all natural enough; but what's to be done?" Mrs. Brown replenished her tea-cup, and, in default of other comfort, helped herself to an additional lump of sugar. "Not quite finished I see, Miss Ashton," as she looked into Katharine's cup; "you are not such a tea-drinker as I am: but, as I was saying, what's to be done?"—"With Laurette?" asked Katharine.—"Oh! for the matter of that, she may go, and somebody else may come; but it isn't one or the other that will make the difference."—"Then is it Mr. Crewe?" asked Katharine, bluntly,— "Why, it is Mr. Crewe, and it isn't. No doubt he's for having his thumb in every pie, and no one else to put in a finger, and certain he and Mamselle manage to

make a regular fight of it every day for nothing at all. But I should be glad to think the evil would go with Mr. Crewe; but I don't, Miss Ashton, I don't. And that's what I would not say to every one, to no one indeed who was not an old friend like yourself." Katharine felt that she knew quite well what the evil was, but she could not bring herself to remark upon it. "Parties,—that's what I can't abide," continued Mrs. Brown; "it never used to be, nor never ought, nor indeed was till Mr. Crewe came into the house. But now it's who's for master, and who's for mistress; and the lady's maid and the gentleman's gentleman at daggers drawn; and it's little enough that I can do to help it."—"But it must be all nonsense," said Katharine; "it is impossible that Colonel or Mrs. Forbes can know anything about it."—"Not the Colonel," replied Mrs. Brown; "he's not a man to think whether he has got a servant or not, as long as he has his orders attended to; but Mrs. Forbes is a different matter. It comes home to her, I'll venture to say, every hour in the day."—"Because Laurette is so foolish, I suppose?" said Katharine.—"Partly that, but partly it would be the same with every one. Poor thing, how she is thwarted!"—"I don't understand," said Katharine.—Mrs. Brown refilled the teapot, left her seat, and tried the bolt of the door, and then sat down again, and in an under voice replied, "The long and the short of the matter is, Miss Ashton, what you and I have seen this many a long day—sorrow to the hour that first I opened my eyes to it—the Colonel's got a will of his own, and my poor dear lady has given into it, till he's a perfect Turk; and it's grown into such a habit, that I do believe he contradicts for the mere sake of contradiction, and not a bit because he cares for what he fusses about. At least, I am sure that nine times

out of ten they are such trifles, it would not be in the mind of any man with a grain of sense to think twice about them. Well, there's Crewe always about him ; and a sharp man, and knowing that it's his interest to humour him ; so whenever the Colonel makes a fuss or complains, there's Crewe certain to aggravate ; and if Mamselle Laurette comes with a message or a wish, there's Crewe always going against her and finding fault, and then she flies into a fury, and there's a grand scene ; you saw to-night what it was. All that to-do was nothing, but because Crewe was cross and would not do some errand in Rilworth." —" And Mrs. Forbes suffers from it, I am afraid," said Katharine. —" Doesn't she suffer ? She likes Laurette in a way, because of her being affectionate, and, poor thing ! she clings so to any one that will love her and be kind to her. But then, Laurette is a fool, and always getting into scrapes, and making the Colonel angry, and many a time he has threatened she shall be sent away ; and she is going before long." —" But the next person who comes may be just as bad," said Katharine. —" Just as bad or worse ; what is wanted is something that will never be found in any that call themselves lady's maids ; at least, as far as my experience goes, and I've had a great deal. It's a nurse and a friend that is required, and how to get one." —Katharine felt as if she could not answer. Such a dreary feeling came over her, such a sense of Jane's trial, it made her very heart sink. If she could only help her ! But how was that to be done ? At last she said, " It is a friend in her own rank of life whom Mrs. Forbes needs." —" It is not what people need, but what they can get, that's to be considered in this world, Miss Ashton," replied the house-keeper. " As for needing, my poor mistress needs enough in all conscience, but she's never a whit the

more likely to get it. The Colonel's a good man; 'tis not for me who have eaten of his bread for fifteen years come next Christmas, to say a word against him; but all that time I've never known any one come into this house, be it man, woman, or child, that came as far as I could see for the mere liking. There were the Miss Forbes, good creatures as ever lived, they used to be here at one time, and my poor mistress was inclined to take a good deal to them, specially to the eldest; but somehow, it didn't do. I don't think the Colonel liked having his wife's thoughts taken off from him, and Miss Forbes used sometimes to laugh at him, and sometimes to go contrary to him, and so the visits have dwindled away till they have come to a mere nothing. It would be the same with any one. You must make up your mind not to cross the Colonel, or you can't live with him."—Katharine sighed deeply.—"He'll see it by and by," continued Mrs. Brown, gravely, "for he's fond of her."—Katharine sat silent for some seconds in deep thought, then she said quietly, but very earnestly, "Something must be done before that." The housekeeper's face brightened, "And do you say that, Miss Ashton? Well, that's a comfort; for I'll tell you there's many a month it has all been on my mind, and no one to say a word to about it, though it was growing worse every day, and only one comfort when you used to come over. That was the thing which did my poor mistress good, and that was what I used to look to to keep her up. And then we went off to London, and there things were—I can't say what—always company at home, or going out late, and Mrs. Forbes wearing away to a thread, and yet never saying a word, like an angel as she is; and the Colonel getting worse and worse, for he's twenty times as contradictory now as he

was. It nearly drove me wild; and all the comfort I had was in thinking that we should soon be coming down here, and then you'd be at hand again. And then, just when we came, the very first thing I heard was the news that you were all to be off to Australia straight. It gave me such a turn! I declare I haven't recovered it yet. But it isn't true surely?"—"It is true that my brother, and his wife, and the children, are going," said Katharine; "but it is not true that I am to go with them."—Mrs. Brown breathed a sigh of relief, "Well! thank Heaven for that. There is some comfort at last left in the world. But 'twill be a lonely life for you. What do you mean to do with yourself? Not go far away I hope."—"Not further than Rilworth, certainly; but I have formed no plans. I hope to do what may be most useful."—"Then you won't go far away from Maplestead, for there's no place where you'll be wanted more."—"I should not like to go far away, and you may be quite sure I will consider it in my plans."—"Thank you. Then I'm sure some good will come. You'll perhaps be over here to-morrow again, and if by chance you should hear of such a person as would do to take Mamselle Laurette's place, you'll take care to mention it."—"Certainly," said Katharine, and she rose, and took up her bonnet and gloves. "Will you please tell Mrs. Forbes that I was here to-night, and that I only did not ask to see her because I knew it was the time when Colonel Forbes was likely to be with her?"—"And I may say you'll be here to-morrow?" said the housekeeper; "she won't be satisfied else; and I can't bear to fret her, she is terribly weak."—"I shall hope to be here at eleven; but you don't think Mrs. Forbes very much worse I trust," said Katharine, anxiously. —The housekeeper shook her head, "It's a wasting,

internal complaint, that's my belief, Miss Ashton. Some say it's one thing, and some another, but nothing that any of them give is of any use, only just at least to set her up for a time; and there's the fret of the spirits working always to keep her back.—Poor thing! poor thing!—This journey to-day was quite sudden, when she wasn't a bit fit for it. The Colonel heard something about possibly a change of parliament, and so he must needs be down here to talk about his votes. How men do slave when their wills go with their work!"

It was a truism which Katharine did not feel at that moment inclined to refute, and she wished Mrs. Brown good evening and returned to Moorlands.

CHAPTER LVIII.

"LETTERS are late," said John, looking at his watch, as he came down to breakfast the next morning. He had become an important man of business now, and the arrival of the post was a serious event in the day. Katharine also looked out anxiously for the post, yet her expectations were by no means definite, only in her state of indecision every trifle became of consequence, as serving in some way to indicate the future. "We shall hear about the passage-money to-day," continued John, "and the outfit."—"And when we must go up to Town," added Selina, who had seldom been in London, and looked forward to her necessary visit, and the pleasure of making purchases, with the excitement of a child. "We shall have a fortnight there, at least," continued John; "Kitty, you mean

to go up with us, and see the last of us, of course?" He meant this kindly, and Katharine tried to reply in the same manner. "I don't know that there will be much pleasure in seeing the last of you, but I will do anything in the world I can to be of use to you."—"Only you won't throw yourself into the plan," continued John, a little reproachfully.—"That's an old story, John, dear," said Katharine, lightly, feeling in a degree relieved and pleased at his mentioning the subject even in this way; "we had better not talk about it."—"Oh! it never would do for Kate," interrupted Selina; "she hasn't half spirit enough, and never had from a child." Katharine smiled; for certainly want of spirit had not been the accusation usually brought forward against her in her young days. "Old Downes has got spirit enough," said John, looking at the postman, who was then just coming up to the house. "Did you ever see an old fellow trudge along more heartily? and such a heap of letters!—now for it!" He hurried out to the door, seized the packet of letters, and tossed them on the table. "'Mrs. John Ashton,'—that's for you, Selly. 'Miss Ashton,' Kate, that's yours. Oh! and here's the outfit." He tore open the envelope, and was soon so engrossed in his business that neither he nor Selina, who leant over his shoulder and read the letter with him, perceived that Katharine had left them.

The hand-writing had brought a thrill to her heart, and a heightened colour to her cheek, which she would fain hide from notice. It was only when the door of her own room was closed, and bolted, that she trusted herself to break the seal.

Not a long letter—yet not one to be read with perfect indifference. It was dated from London.

"MY DEAR MISS ASHTON, —

"I have this moment heard most startling

news, that John intends going to Australia immediately, and that you have resolved to go with him. May I entreat for one line by return of post, to set my mind at ease? I might ask for more, but that I hope to be at Moorlands by the day after to-morrow, at the farthest. In the meantime, one word will be I cannot say how great a satisfaction. In the greatest haste, very sincerely yours,

“CHARLES RONALDSON.”

The day after to-morrow ! And would she see him then so soon ; and would he come only for her ; and was he really so deeply anxious, and interested for her ! It was a ray of dazzling sunshine in a most dreary world, and Katharine's heart bounded with gratitude for the Mercy which had again sent her comfort in her hour of need. More she could not even then venture to think of. Though there was much implied in the note, it was still, even in its haste, most carefully worded. She read it again and again, but something in her own mind kept her from drawing forth all that another might have gathered from it. To expect so much from him was to acknowledge to herself how much she required ; and Katharine, even now, was striving to keep from herself the consciousness of the state of her own feelings. She tried to persuade herself, and almost she succeeded, that even her present comfort was derived from the remembrance of old times and the support of long-tried friendship ; and when the thought suggested itself, that the note was not a common note, and could not be shown to her brother, she excused her unwillingness by saying that if John saw it, Selina must too, and she was always laughing at her about Charles, and so it might be better not to bring uncomfortable remarks upon herself.

Such was the state of Katharine's mind when she set out to walk to Maplestead; and changed indeed was the appearance of the world, both physical and moral, since she wandered forth in her lonely sorrow the preceding evening. It was morning now, brilliant in beauty, warm and genial: there were sweet songs of birds to be heard, and the lowing of browsing cattle, and the cry of the shepherd amongst the hills, and the faint murmur of the soft summer breeze amongst rustling branches, and, from far away, the gurgling of a little brook, making its way over smooth pebbles to join a distant river. All spoke of hope, and energy, and a loving, working obedience to an Almighty Will; and in Katharine's heart, too, there were feelings which sprang up responsive to the teaching of nature;—a heart to rejoice in loving trust, and an energy untired, because it had never yet been allowed to slumber,—and an humble devotion, willing at any sacrifice to answer the call of Him whom she served, and say, "Speak, Lord, for thy servant heareth." And so, even with the veil of sorrow over the natural gladness of her disposition, Katharine went forth that morning rejoicing.

She went again to the back of the house; it was always more pleasant to be admitted by a housemaid, and shown first into the housekeeper's room, than to be received by a footman, and perhaps encounter the stately Crewe. "As good as your word, I see, Miss Ashton," was the greeting which she received; "and Mrs. Forbes is all ready for you, and quite in a fuss expecting you; and the Colonel's in the library with Mr. Andrews, and loads of people waiting to see him on business, so you'll have your time all to yourself."—"And how is Mrs. Forbes this morning?" inquired Katharine. "Why, as ill as she need be. She had one of her fainting fits last

night, after you were gone,—all, I suspect, from the flurry of that foolish girl Laurette, who would come in the Colonel's way, and got a threat of being sent off at a moment's notice; and the consequence of that was a bad night, and so this morning she's not up; but she will see you, notwithstanding; she sent down word about it.”—“Then I had better go at once, I suppose?” said Katharine.—“Yes, if you don't mind,—shall I ring for Laurette, to show you the way?”—“No, thank you,” replied Katharine; “not if I am expected. I know my way pretty well,” she added, with a smile; “and I suppose if I knock at the door, that will be sufficient.”—“Oh yes, quite,—it will be all the better if Laurette is not there, only take care she does not listen. Perhaps, if you don't mind, you had better go up the back staircase, and then you will be out of the way of the Colonel and the gentlemen.”

Back stairs or front stairs were alike to Katharine, and she proceeded to the gallery leading to Jane's room,—the servants whom she met making way for her as a privileged person. Her knock was not answered, as she had feared, by Laurette, for Jane was alone. Her feeble voice was scarcely heard, and when Katharine went in, she found her, as the housekeeper had said, in bed. That might have made some difference in her appearance; but Katharine was instantly struck by the change which had passed over her even since they had last met. Then she had seemed only very much out of health, in a state from which many are known to recover, and to enjoy years of comparative health; but there was no trace of this now, she looked a complete wreck—worn and emaciated, and with that unnatural sparkling of the eye which betokens the presence of constant fever. She had no cough, or Katharine would at once have considered her

consumptive: but there was something almost worse in this hidden disease, which no one seemed exactly to understand; and there was a restlessness also in her manner, which was very painful. It might partly have been physical, the consequence of the irregular action of the heart; but Katharine had not been many minutes with her before she perceived that it was in a degree the work of the mind also,—she was like a person who has been frightened, and has never recovered the shock. When Katharine first went in, and sat down by her, the very way in which she seized her hand, and kept it, betokened not only mere pleasure, but a nervous fear of losing something precious; and her eye wandered perpetually to the door, and she made Katharine go and try it, to be quite sure that it was bolted; and even then she was not satisfied. Katharine was so quick in all her perceptions, and loved Jane so truly, that these little things were seen and remarked, and even commented upon in her own mind as soon as they passed before her notice; but there was nothing in her outward manner to betray any agitation,—she was even, perhaps, singularly composed. She spoke slowly, and without energy, and only a very little touch of deep feeling, which she could not restrain, showed itself when Jane said, in her sweet voice, and looking at her with tears dimming her eyes,—“I have longed to come to you, dear Katharine. I did not think any one else would be able to feel for you as I can.”—“I have had a great deal of comfort, dear Mrs. Forbes,” said Katharine; “more, a great deal, than I could possibly expect. Yes, a great deal more,” she repeated, and she remembered the morning’s letter. “But I do think there is no one that can understand things quite as you can.”—“I like to hear you say that,—are you quite sure you bolted

the door?" Katharine only smiled; she would not even look to the door again. "Colonel Forbes might have things to say to me, and he might wish to find me alone," continued Jane, apologetically; "it worries him if Laurette is here, he does not like her."—"She is not a very pleasant person, is she?" asked Katharine.—"She is fond of me," said Jane; "and I like people to be fond of me," she added, in the touchingly simple tone of an humble child.—"A great many people are very fond of you, I am sure," said Katharine.—"A few, not very many. I don't know many people, Katharine; that is, I have not many friends,—not any, I think, except you." Katharine smoothed her hand fondly, and said, "You have no one who loves you better;" and Jane looked up at her confidently, and repeated, "No one." But a change came over her face the moment afterwards, and she added,—"No one amongst my friends; one never can reckon children, or"—and she hesitated—"one's husband."—"Are the children well?" asked Katharine. "Yes, quite well: London suited them very well; and Lucy was just put in good training about her shoulder, which is inclined to grow out; and I would have stayed another fortnight, for her to have seen the surgeon again, but Colonel Forbes did not wish it."—"He is not generally so anxious to get back to the country," said Katharine. "No, but some persons say that parliament will be dissolved before long, and you see he was obliged to come. We had a very hurried journey yesterday. I did not know I was coming away till the morning, and Laurette did not either; but it could not be helped."—"And is Laurette a helpful person in an emergency?" inquired Katharine. "Not very, she loses her memory, and is flurried; and Colonel Forbes is rather

quick in his orders sometimes, and that makes her worse.” — “But surely you might find some one more useful,” said Katharine. — “More useful, perhaps, but not so fond of me.” — “Is that very weak, Katharine?” she added, with a smile, which brought back to Katharine’s mind the demurely arch expression of Jane’s face in childhood. — “I think,” said Katharine, “that it would be a good thing if your friends were to interfere for you, dear Mrs. Forbes, and find some one who is really competent to wait upon you. The scene I saw down stairs last night was quite sufficient to convince me that Laurette is perfectly incapable of performing her duties properly.” — “Ah, you were here last night. Mrs. Brown told me about it, but that was only — didn’t you hear a step in the passage? Do just go and see if it is Colonel Forbes; but don’t show yourself, if you can help it, or he might not like to come in.” Katharine went to the door, but found no one there. “Bolt it! be sure you bolt it!” said Jane; and then, when Katharine returned to her, she continued, — “Crewe interferes, and put things wrong. I don’t think anything will go right whilst he is here.” — “You should have some one who would not care for Crewe,” said Katharine. “Ah, Katharine! you can’t comprehend; how should you! But I shall not care for anything now that I am at home again, and you here.” — “I shall come and see you whenever I possibly can,” said Katharine; “even when I have left Moorlands I hope I shall still be very near.” — “Going from Moorlands!” — and Jane started up, and gazed at her with a look of entreaty; “who says you must?” — “No one, exactly, but John and Selina are going to Australia.” — “And you are going with them, I am sure, and it was all true,” exclaimed Jane. She threw her arm round Katharine.

rine's neck, and, clinging to her, added in a hollow voice, "and you promised you would be with me." — "Promised, and therefore, God helping me, I will keep my promise, dear Mrs. Forbes," said Katharine, soothingly. "I am not going to Australia. I am not going anywhere far away; — not that I know of, or intend, that is," she added, correcting herself as if by instinct. "I did not mean to frighten you. I would not have said so, if I had thought you would have misunderstood," she continued, alarmed at the quick throbbing of Jane's heart, which she could even hear. — "It is not all your doing," said Jane, recovering herself a little; "but once before, a fortnight ago now, they came to me with a story — Laurette did: I think she heard it from Crewe, and it was very sad to me, — it made me ill. Oh! Katharine, I have looked so to your help since I have been worse," she added, as she sank back upon her pillow, and laid her burning hand in Katharine's. "And did they tell you I was going to Australia?" inquired Katharine. "Laurette said it, and I asked Philip, — Colonel Forbes, — and I think I made him angry, he was so vexed at the moment. I was to have gone out to a party, and I could not, because I was ill. He told me it was nonsense; he said your brother had bought land, that was all; and it was what you had told me. He would not let me write again. You know I had just sent you a few lines. He said I was to be kept quiet, and writing letters, and having them, was excitement; and he made Dr. Lowe forbid it. I trusted his word quite." A quick step was heard along the passage. "That is Laurette," said Jane, quickly, her ear catching the slightest sound; "Katharine, don't go, tell me again." — "I am not going to Australia, I am going to stay with you," said Katharine, quietly,

but very earnestly. "With me? ah! if it could be! Just look out; tell Laurette she need not wait. I think sometimes she listens." Katharine opened the door suddenly, so suddenly that Laurette was taken by surprise, and with a face of indignant confusion turned away. "This must not be, dear Mrs. Forbes," observed Katharine, returning to her, and speaking very gravely. "If you were well, you would be the first person to see that it is unfitting."—"She is going," said Jane, bitterly; "I mean to tell her to-day. Death will come, and I shall be at the mercy of a stranger." A sudden impulse crossed Katharine's mind; another, equally sudden, checked it; it seemed as if her heart, for the moment, was paralysed. Jane looked at her anxiously. "Katharine, you are very pale."—"Am I?"—and the blood rushed to Katharine's cheek, but forsook it again almost instantly. "It is extremely hot," she said; and she moved away to the open window, and stood by it, looking out upon the large trees in the park, as they glittered in the gladness of the sunshine. That promise,—that long-ago promise, that she would, if possible, comfort Jane in the hour of trial, which she could not but think might be near,—how was it to be kept?—and what was it that held her back when she would fain offer to keep it?—Pride? There had been no pride when, weeks before, she had said that she would be with Jane as her servant, and had felt that the permission would be happiness.—Self-indulgence? shrinking from the discomforts of such a position? But that was not Katharine's temptation at any moment, least of all when her affections were concerned.—Coldness? Had she suddenly forgotten the ties of youth,—the true love of advancing years? Now, when Jane was lonely, suffering, it might be dying—neglected

by her husband, fretted by her servant, clinging to her as her best comfort, — was she about to shrink from making the offer, which before, in a calmer hour, she had felt might be not only a duty, but an unspeakable comfort?

It was a moment of keen struggle; for ever as she thought of Jane, and her sorrow, and her affection, a voice whispered in her ear that a dearer love was at that moment awaiting her. It told her that she was not free to act for herself, that another had a claim upon her; and it suggested also—though the suggestion was in a moment cast aside as unworthy—that Charles Ronaldson, rising in his profession, increasing in worldly wealth, holding a station which, from his character, was higher than was due to his birth, might hesitate to connect himself with one who, from whatever circumstances, had been led to place herself in a position of dependence.

Swift as lightning the thoughts flashed through her mind, and as swiftly also were they rejected by the inborn sincerity of Katharine's noble heart. The trail of her duties—was it not here to be found? The present certain, the future uncertain! Must not the sacrifice be made, and the future placed in the Hands of God? Whatever Charles might feel, she was as yet free; he had no real claim upon her. Beyond this she need not look. Whether for weeks or months,—whether such a step might involve a long separation, or even worse sorrow,—it was not for her to inquire: the present alone was her care. She went back to the bedside, and, taking Jane's hand, said,—“Dear Mrs. Forbes, would you do me one great favour—the greatest you can?” Jane looked at her in surprise. “A favour, dear Katharine! Of course; can you doubt it?”—“A favour greater than any you have conferred yet,” con-

tinued Katharine. "When Laurette goes may I replace her?" Jane evidently did not at once understand her meaning. Katharine repeated her words; and still Jane said, with the same wondering look,—"Yes, I trust you to be with me as much as you can."—"Not as much as I can, but always," said Katharine. "I will be your maid, if you will have me," she added, speaking with perfect plainness, from the fear of doing Jane harm by anything like suspense. Jane's countenance fell. "No, no," she exclaimed eagerly, "it must not be; only be with me at the last, when that shall come."—"But you shall listen to me, dear Mrs. Forbes," said Katharine, in a tone of great quietness; "and I will tell you why it may and must be." But Jane would not hear: "Impossible!" she repeated, again and again; "my maid! impossible."—"Then it is impossible to make me happy," said Katharine. "But to give up your friends, your position, to wait upon me,—to be my servant! Oh, no, Katharine, never; it would be beneath you."—"Beneath me to comfort you, and do God's will?" said Katharine; "that can scarcely be. Will you listen to me for a few moments, dear Mrs. Forbes?" she added, and she bent tenderly over Jane, smoothing her pillow, and making her lean her head against her shoulder. "I will speak of the change in my position first," she continued, "since it is that which weighs with you, and I will tell you honestly what I feel about it. We are all workers for God; if we are not we ought to be; I at least would wish to be. Years ago, Mr. Reeves taught me to feel, that to work for Him is so great an honour, that it makes the meanest task noble; so when He puts a claim before me, it cannot be, it is impossible it should be, degradation. If I were a queen I could not be greater, and if I were a beggar I could

not be less, than I am, for still I must be what I am in His sight." Jane pressed her hand and smiled, but still she murmured, "The world will not understand."—"And if I were living for the world," said Katharine, "that would assuredly be of importance to me. But, dear Mrs. Forbes, I may say to you what I could not to others. It has been my prayer and my endeavour for years to live not for the world but for God, and He has so far blessed me that I cannot measure either duties or trials by the world's standard. I do not mean," she added, "that I am above the weakness of being affected by it; but I do mean that when it comes to a question of decision in matters of real importance, it is absolutely impossible for me to attach weight to what the world will say, except so far as my duty to God is affected by it. Remember," she continued, "that I have no one to be in any way injured—if such a thing could be—by what I may choose to do. I am free; with every tie of gratitude and love to make me sure that, in giving you comfort, I am doing the work which God has appointed me."—"But it may be done in another way, dear Katharine," said Jane, fondly. "If you will stay near me, you can still be my comfort."—"But not in the same way or to the same extent," said Katharine. "I cannot live near you,—I must at least be two miles from you,—I can only see you occasionally as a visitor; I shall have no power to interfere, however I may perceive things wanting for your comfort. If I do more, I shall excite jealousy and ill-feeling in the person who may be your attendant; for I could not speak with any authority, as a friend in your own rank, or a relation, might. I shall have no office, and no duties, and I can therefore be of very little use to you."—"But, could you not come and stay here?" said Jane.—"No, impossible; I

could have no pretence for it, and there would be still the same difficulties in the way of assisting you. If I come at all it must be in a definite position, which shall have its own duties, and which will excite no jealousy, because every one will understand it. And, think," she added, her face brightening with a smile, "if I were penniless, and such an offer were made me, you yourself, dear Mrs. Forbes, would be amongst the first to say that it ought not to be rejected. Has the love of the friend to whom one has clung from childhood a less claim than the necessities of self-love?"—"Oh! Katharine!" exclaimed Jane, eagerly, "I did not know before how selfish I could be."—"It shall not be selfishness," continued Katharine, more lightly; "if you will consent, it shall be in such a way as to make you feel that the obligation is on my side as much as on yours. You shall give me all that you would give to Laurette, and you shall have the satisfaction of feeling that you are enabling me to provide, not only for myself, but to put by something for others. I am very anxious about my brother's prospects," she continued, "and it would be a great comfort to me to feel that my little fortune was untouched and ready for him, or rather for his children, when they may need it. The thought has crossed my mind before, that I should like to do something of the kind. You will say yes, if only for that reason!"—Jane smiled, and said, "I cannot fancy it possible."—"But it is agreed to," persisted Katharine.—Jane looked up, with an expression almost of fear in her face. "What will Colonel Forbes say?" she asked.—"He will not like it," said Katharine, quickly; "but he will be brought round," she added. Jane's head sank back upon her pillow, and, in a tone of despondency, which showed how great was her disappointment, she said, "Katharine, it is very,

very kind, but it is better not to think about it.”—
“Will you leave it to me to manage?” inquired Katharine.—Jane smiled sadly. “You cannot do everything!”—“Not everything,—yet more perhaps than you imagine; only will you trust me?”—
—“You must not make him angry,” said Jane, quickly, and instinctively her head turned to the door, as if she thought she heard him coming.—“No, indeed, you may depend upon me. I think I know him.”—“Do you?” said Jane, doubtfully; “he is very particular.”—“Yes, and not very fond of me,” said Katharine. Jane made no answer. “But he cannot be sorry to know for certain that my brother is going from Moorlands!” continued Katharine.—
“Not very, I am afraid,” replied Jane, gravely.—
“Then he will look upon me more favourably than before?” said Katharine.—“Yes, a little, perhaps;” and then, fearing that she had betrayed too much of her husband’s sentiments, Jane added, “I dare say he always looked upon you as part of your brother.”—“I think, perhaps, he did,” replied Katharine; “but I mean, if I can, to make him look upon me now as part of myself. I will speak to him myself!”—Jane could not conceal her alarm. “It will never do,” she exclaimed.—“Nothing else will do, if it does not,” said Katharine. Jane’s face was utterly desponding. “Dear Mrs. Forbes, if we are doing right,” continued Katharine, “we must hope that we shall be helped through everything.”—
—“Yes, but you don’t really know him,” continued Jane.—“I know myself,” replied Katharine; “may I ask to speak with him?”—Jane hesitated. “It seems madness,” she said; “and can it possibly be right?”—“The right is for me to decide,” replied Katharine; “if I am satisfied, that is enough.”—
“It is taking advantage of your affection,” said Jane; “that cannot be right.”—“It is making me

very happy," said Katharine; and Jane smiled fondly and gratefully, and, once more leaning her head against Katharine's shoulder, murmured, "It is rest."

CHAPTER LIX.

"Miss ASHTON wishes to speak to you, sir."—Colonel Forbes was in his study, writing. "Ask her to walk in;" and Katharine entered, and seated herself, whilst he scarcely looked up from the table. The sight of her deep mourning dress, when he did lay down his pen to give her more of his attention, softened his feelings towards her; and he asked her, with something like interest, how she was, and her brother, and the children. "All pretty well, thank you, sir," said Katharine. A pause—which Katharine thought proper to break by proceeding to business; so she added,—“You must have heard of my brother's plans, sir.”—“He has given me notice that he is going to quit Moorlands,” said Colonel Forbes; “I do not know anything more, except from report.”—“He is going to Australia, sir, almost immediately; he thinks it will be a good investment of his money, as you said.” Colonel Forbes was a little flattered, yet anxious not to have a dangerous value attached to his words. “I don't know that I spoke definitely of any particular part of Australia; your brother has not regularly consulted me. I hope he has had good advice.”—“He has been told that he is doing wisely, by a good many people, sir,” said Katharine; “but I am afraid of it myself, and I have not liked to risk my own money, and so I have settled to stay at home.”—“Oh! indeed.”

Colonel Forbes looked impatient; he did not see what concern he could have in Katharine's plans, either of going or remaining.—“And I have not much money, and I should like to increase it,” said Katharine.—“Yes, very right.”—Colonel Forbes thought he had discovered her object. “Have you any particular scheme in view for making more of your money?”—“Only by work, sir,” said Katharine. “I should wish to work whilst I have the power.”—“Certainly, quite right,” and Colonel Forbes smiled approvingly, as he always did when he saw other persons following what they considered their duty energetically. Katharine, however, was not deceived by the smile; she knew there was a battle to come, but she went on boldly; “I am thinking of going to service, sir.”—Colonel Forbes did look then exceedingly surprised, but he was not pained; rather, perhaps, if he had fully examined his heart, he would have found there a little lurking satisfaction: still he put on the proper air of sympathy, and said, “I am very sorry; is it really necessary? Does nothing else open to you?”—“Nothing that will suit me as well, sir,” said Katharine; “there is no risk in it.”—“Certainly no risk; but have you consulted your friends? I scarcely think they would approve of it?”—“My brother will be out of England,” replied Katharine; “I have no other near relation to care what I do. I thought, sir, that perhaps if I were able to support myself without touching my income just yet, you might be good enough to give me some advice as to what I had better do with it. I should feel quite safe with your opinion.” Katharine said this heartily; for it was the one point in Colonel Forbes' character which she, like every one else, had always understood and estimated. His strict honour had kept up his influence, when his irritable temper and absence of sympathy might otherwise

have destroyed it. Colonel Forbes also was perfectly well aware of this one bright point in his natural disposition, and certainly he did not think lightly of it. Katharine's allusion flattered his self-love, and he threw himself with some interest into her concerns, inquired how her money was invested, what interest she received for it, and many other business questions, all of which, for the time, made him feel in a degree more friendly towards her, especially when he recollected that Moorlands was free, and that there would be no more trouble about John Ashton's vote. Katharine was as confidential as she could be about all her affairs, and very grateful for the advice offered her; though she quietly put aside the frequent suggestion that she would consult her comfort and respectability more by living upon her income, however small, than by trying to increase it by taking a dependent situation. She took care, however, not to give any trouble beyond mere words; for she was aware that Colonel Forbes liked talking much better than working. Her heart was trembling all the time, for she was still far removed from the real object of the interview. The conversation was drawing to a close; Colonel Forbes' tone was a little sharper, his words were fewer, and spoken more quickly—dangerous symptoms of impatience. Katharine felt that she had no time to lose; she took up her parasol, as a token that she was going, and with some hesitation said, "I had one more thing to ask you, sir, if you would not think it very impertinent."—"Pray speak,"—and there was a polite bend of the head; but the movement of Colonel Forbes' fingers on the table showed, as usual, that he was a man who had no leisure to trifle away. "If I go to service," continued Katharine, "I should not like to take any inferior place; I should wish either to be a lady's maid, or a house-

keeper, or something of that kind; and I heard this morning that Mrs. Forbes was likely to have a place vacant before long, as Mademoiselle Laurette was going away, and I thought I should like very much to try if I could suit it, if it were not taking a liberty to offer myself."

Colonel Forbes looked utterly confounded; an angry ejaculation of "Folly, absurdity!" rose to his lips; but Katharine stood before him so humble, simple, and honest, so exactly fitting even then the place she had proposed for herself, that he really could not bring to his mind a single objection. "Indeed! strange! I fear," he began, and then broke off and commenced again; "I could not say; it is a sudden notion."—"I am afraid it is, sir," was Katharine's quiet reply. "I would not wish to be troublesome," and again there was a movement as if she was going. He was still more puzzled by her calmness. He had a vague idea of some plot, some romantic folly, as he would have called it, of his wife's; but this extreme self-possession did not favour the notion, yet he said angrily, as if determined to fathom the depths of the mystery, "Stop: may I beg you, Miss Ashton, if you can spare me one minute longer. Does Mrs. Forbes know of this plan of yours?"—"Yes, sir, I mentioned it to her just now."—"And she approved, of course?" he said, with some irony in his tone.—"She was good enough to say she would be willing, sir; but she did not know whether you would like it, and then I said I would ask." Still more irritating to Colonel Forbes' excitability. After all there was no mystery. He was quite silent, and his attitude and expression, as he threw himself back in his chair, were by no means encouraging. "I am sorry to have taken up so much of your time, sir," said Katharine; "there is no

hurry for an answer. Perhaps you would be good enough to speak to Mrs. Forbes, and I might call again. I can work pretty well," she added, "and I have been accustomed to read out, and I can sit up at night." He fixed his eyes upon her with an expression of bewilderment. She was so entirely the lady's maid offering herself for a situation, that he had a difficulty in thinking of her as Katharine Ashton. He spoke to her again as in her new character, and said, "Mrs. Forbes will require a great deal of attention; are you strong?"—"Yes, sir, very."—"And you say you can work well?"—"Yes, sir, I have been always accustomed to make my own dresses." He considered for a few moments longer—what else could he ask? The question of wages crossed his mind, but it was rejected by an instinct of unfitness. "You shall hear either from me or from Mrs. Forbes on the subject; it is impossible to give an immediate answer."—"Thank you, sir," and Katharine curtsied and moved to the door. Something in her manner brought back vividly to Colonel Forbes the remembrance that she was still Katharine Ashton, and his parting bow was, if not cordial, at least courteous.

Katharine closed the door behind her, and felt that once again she breathed freely. What was to be done next was a perplexity. She did not dare go up-stairs again to Jane, lest Colonel Forbes might find her there and be annoyed; yet she did very earnestly wish to give her some caution as to what she was to say. Jane's affection might, she was sure, carry her beyond the bounds of prudence. If Colonel Forbes' jealousy were excited, the plan was hopeless. Now he evidently looked upon her wish merely as the desire to seize upon the first situation which offered itself. She was already in his eyes his wife's maid, entitled to just the same

degree of attention as any other person similarly circumstanced, and Katharine knew him well enough to be quite certain that she could only be of real use to Jane by retaining that position. If Colonel Forbes once felt himself under restraint from having her in the house, there would be no chance of his allowing her to stay. In her difficulty she had recourse to her friend the housekeeper, and proceeded to her room to ask for a sheet of note paper, and a pen and ink, that she might write, as she said, one line to Mrs. Forbes, whom she did not wish to disturb again. "Dear Mrs. Forbes," the note began. Katharine felt as if she ought to put "Dear Madam;" but that would have vexed Jane, and she wrote, therefore, as she had been accustomed. "I have seen Colonel Forbes, and told him that I wish to have a situation in order that I may put by my income for the present. He did not seem so much inclined to object to my waiting upon you as I had feared. I told him what I could do, and he said I should hear from him or from you on the subject. I was afraid it might seem impertinent if I said how much pleasure it would give me to do anything for you, so he does not know anything except that I wish for employment. Perhaps that is all it is good to say, for indeed I only wish to be allowed to be your maid. I hope you will tell me everything that I can do for you just as if I was Mlle. Laurette; that will be the only way to make me comfortable.

"Your obliged and respectful

"KATHARINE ASHTON."

Katharine went home, and the first thing which caught her eye when she went to her room was the envelope of Charles Ronaldson's note lying upon her dressing-table. Then, and not till then, in the

hurry and excitement of her feelings since her resolution had been taken, did she fully feel what she had done ; and then also a terrible misgiving crossed her mind that perhaps she had made a mistake.

So great a sacrifice it might be! for once entered upon Jane's service, she could not foresee when, or under what circumstances, she would be at liberty to leave it. The rejected scruples returned, and with them the pang of acknowledging for the first time how deeply her happiness depended upon the certainty of Charles Ronaldson's affection. She longed to have some other opinion upon her decision, her own reason seemed for the time insufficient. Yet there was one fact to which again and again she could recur with comfort. If she had decided differently, she certainly would not have been satisfied ; even if she had waited till after her interview with Charles, which was the first thought that had suggested itself to her, there would have been a lurking consciousness of selfishness which must have rendered her wretched ; and, whatever might be the result of that interview, Jane's claim upon her could not be affected by it. It would have been postponing a duty with a secret wish to be prevented from carrying it out, and this could not be honest.

There was a weary struggle of conflicting feelings, but peace, or something which resembled it, came at last. Katharine had done what was most single-hearted, and in that conviction she could rest satisfied that He, who was ordering the events of her life, would overrule all for good, even those which seemed most untoward.

CHAPTER LX.

AND the morrow came, and Katharine awoke very early, with the dim consciousness of something painful, undecided, important — something which was to render that day different from all other days. She might have striven to hide from herself before the state of her own heart, but she could do so no longer. The barrier raised by her own hand between herself and freedom had been the means of discovering it, and now every other hope or fear was lost in the agonising doubt whether, after all, she had not been deceiving herself as to the extent of Charles Ronaldson's feeling. If he really loved her still, then come what might—delay, separation, trial under any form—it could be thankfully borne. If he did not—Katharine's mind was strong, but so also were her affections, and she turned from the thought with the prayer, that “as her day so might her strength be.”

There was a great deal of conversation at breakfast about plans and business; and Katharine felt strangely put aside when she found how everything could be arranged, and was being managed without her. Everything important that is; for Selina, as usual, made her very useful in minor ways, and provided her with employment not only for that day, but for many days to come. Both she and John seemed to think now that there was only one thing in the world worth Katharine's consideration, or indeed that of any other person, and that was their own emigration. They knew that Charles Ronaldson was expected, but they fully believed that he was coming entirely on their account; and

John boastfully went through the convincing reason which he meant to bring forward to prove indisputably that he was right in his schemes, and that they must answer. As to any idea connecting him with Katharine, it either was destroyed by the sense of his own overwhelming interests, or if it did cross his mind, it was thought of as an unimportant possibility.

Katharine occupied herself unceasingly all the morning, as much to drive away distracting thoughts, as because she had really a great deal to do. Charles could not arrive till two o'clock; he might not come till five. The morning seemed interminable. She was every minute expecting a note from Maplestead, and longing to receive it, feeling what a comfort it would be to have her mind definitely settled upon that one important point. But it was not till one o'clock that a note was brought her. It was opened with nervous haste. She had but little doubt as to its contents; and yet when she read, "Dear Katharine,—Colonel Forbes has said 'yes.' How shall I ever thank you enough?"—the note dropped from her hand, and she felt as if her fate was sealed. Still perhaps, upon the whole, she was relieved. Suspense at such a time was worse than any certainty; and her active, straightforward mind instantly turned to the task of driving away any morbid fancies, and looking to her position truly. Bound she was unquestionably, but not bound for ever. If Jane were to rally again, she might be able to leave her comfortably in the course of a few months; if not, at least there could be no regret in having fulfilled a sacred promise at the expense of present personal feeling. At any rate, it was not well to exaggerate what she was doing, either for her own sake or for Jane's. To do so would tend to make her conceited as to herself, and

exacting as to the return of gratitude she might expect. A lesson of simply doing right for the present, and trusting the future, was put before her; and, difficult though it might be, she was resolved, with God's help, to bear it.

Two o'clock! and dinner was over, and John preparing to drive Selina into Rilworth. Katharine felt very thankful they were going; she did not once remind them that Charles Ronaldson might arrive in their absence, lest it should induce them to stay. Selina came down stairs dressed for going out, and impatient because the chaise was not at the door. "I hear the rattle of the wheels," said John, looking out of the window.—Katharine heard wheels too, but the sound was much more like the rumble of a fly.—"It is not the chaise, it is a cart going down the lane," said Selina; and Katharine felt as if they must both have known what foolish thoughts had been in her mind.—"I don't think it's anything going down the lane, but coming up," observed John; an observation which made Selina put her head out very far to see whether it was correct.—"A fly, sure enough! with one man in it."—"Charles Ronaldson," said John.—"What a bore! I must go to Rilworth, if I walk," said Selina. "I shall not let any Charles Ronaldson keep me at home; Katharine must entertain him."—They both turned round and looked at her, and laughed; but Katharine was not half as angry with them as with herself, for she felt her face become crimson to the temples. The fly drove up to the door, and there was a short pause whilst the driver was being paid. "I must go out and receive him, I suppose," said John, lingering as if he had not quite made up his mind what he ought to do.—"Mind that I must go into Rilworth!" was Selina's rejoinder, as the door closed behind him.

“So provoking!” she added, turning to Katharine; “I made sure he would have come by the five o’clock train.”—“Yes, very strange,” said Katharine.—“Not so much strange as provoking,” observed Selina, shortly. “There’s nothing strange in a man’s coming at two o’clock, that I know of. Why, Katharine, what a boggle you are making there!” She took up Katharine’s work — a frock for little Clara.—“Am I?” and Katharine felt ashamed to discover that she had been sewing the sleeves together. She began to unpick them quickly, but without looking up.—“They are a desperately long time,” said Selina, going to the door; but at that very moment it was opened, and Charles Ronaldson entered, followed by John. Katharine’s work fell from her hand, and she stood up, but she was half-hidden by Selina.—“You are come early,” said Selina, shaking hands with tolerable heartiness.—“Yes, thank you; but——.” He looked round, and, leaving his sentence unfinished, turned to Katharine. She felt that her hand was icy cold, her manner miserably stiff; but her head swam and her eyes were dizzy, and she sat down again and took up her work. He gave her one fixed, penetrating glance, and then spoke again to Selina: “You are going out I see, and you must not let me interfere with you. I know you must be wonderfully busy.”—“Thank you, but we must look after you first,” said John. “You have not dined I know. Selly, you must take care of him.”—“There’s not much in the house I am afraid,” said Selina, “except cold meat.”—“Shall I go and see?” inquired Katharine, in a very quiet, low voice.—“Thank you, if you would; that might be the best plan, as we are forced to go into Rilworth. You won’t think us very rude, I hope, Mr. Ronaldson?”—Katharine had laid aside her work and

was standing at the door. Charles went up to her: "Pray, Miss Ashton, don't trouble yourself. I don't in the least care what I have; bread and cheese will be as good as anything. Please stay," he added, in a lower tone.—Katharine said something which was scarcely intelligible, and left the room. Selina called after her: "There can be a mutton chop ready in no time, Kate, if you'll just be good enough to see about it. Or, are you grown particular after your illness, Mr. Ronaldson?" she added.—He smiled, and said he was afraid his particularity consisted in not having much appetite; but his journey would do him good, no doubt—change always did. There was a silence of some seconds. John did not venture to allude to business; he was afraid to begin the subject, for Selina's patience was nearly exhausted. Charles leant back in a chair and seemed tired, as if even that short conversation had been an effort. "The chaise at last," exclaimed Selina, and she went up to the window and began to scold the boy for his delay.—"It seems dreadfully inhospitable to run away and leave you," observed John; "but we shall be back again by six o'clock."—"What? I beg your pardon; pray don't think about it," exclaimed Charles, starting up from his reverie.—John laughed. "Dreaming, I declare! Well, you may sleep to your heart's content, if you will wake up to have a chat with me by-and-by. Don't let Kate starve you; she is a little inclined that way." Charles made no answer, but insisted upon going to the door, and helping Mrs. John Ashton into the chaise, and arranging her cloak comfortably for her.—"Good-bye, Mr. Ronaldson; good-bye, my dear fellow; make yourself quite at home; we must be back by six;"—and John and Selina drove off, and Charles Ronaldson, with a face of deadly pale-

ness, leant for a moment against the porch, and then passing his hand across his forehead, as if to drive away harassing thoughts, returned to the parlour.

No Katharine was there; he sat down in the arm-chair, started up, paced the room, reseated himself, looked out of the window, walked the apartment again with even rapid strides, and at length, leaning his forehead upon the mantelpiece, actually groaned in the agony of his suspense. The door opened very gently,—Katharine and a little maid-servant came in together. The maid carried a small tray, and Katharine moved the books from the table to make room for it. “It is a poached egg, Mr. Ronaldson, I thought you might like that first; and will you take wine or beer?”—“Nothing, thank you, only water.” He did not move to the table, his eye followed the servant-girl, as she placed the chair for him, and lingered to put things, as she considered, tidy. “The mutton chop will be ready in a few minutes,” said Katharine, preparing to leave the room again, “will you ring for it?” He could bear this no longer, and, placing himself before her, he said, “Perhaps you would allow me a few minutes’ conversation first.”—“Will that do, Miss?” said the servant, looking around her with a pleased air.—“Yes, thank you, Fanny, very well.”—“And I will ring,” exclaimed Charles, following her to the door, and closing it.—It was re-opened: “Will the gentleman like whole potatoes or mashed?”—“I will ring; yes, I will ring,” was the incoherent reply, and the door was once more shut. He came back to Katharine, who was sitting down, for her knees trembled so that she could not stand. “Miss Ashton, forgive me, I have been very impatient.”—Katharine smiled faintly.—“Very impatient!” he repeated; “but there may be an excuse.—I have

not thanked you for your note.”—“I was glad to send it,” said Katharine.—“Thank you, you don’t know what it was to me.” He paused.—Katharine looked for her work. It was her resource against nervousness; he thought she was wishing to leave him, and his voice changed. “I beg your pardon, I am detaining you; I see you are busy.”—“Oh! no; not at all, I have nothing to do; my time is at my own disposal,” said Katharine.—Tears gathered in her eyes, and he saw them. “That must be very sad to you when you have been so occupied. May I be allowed to say how much I have felt for you?”—“It has been a great comfort to me to think of it,” replied Katharine. She raised her eyes to his gratefully, and a look of confidence and hope passed over his face as he said, “It could never be so great a comfort to you to receive, as to me to offer help of any kind. I have so feared that I might be intruding.”—“That could never be,” said Katharine, “after years of friendship.”—He repeated the word friendship with an accent of pain.—“You do not reject it, I hope,” said Katharine, trying to smile.—“Reject it? Heaven forbid! but, Miss Ashton, it was friendship years ago.”—“Yes,” was Katharine’s only reply, and her hands trembled so that she could scarcely hold her needle. He hesitated, was about to speak, then checked himself again, and said abruptly: “Are promises made in haste never to be broken under any circumstances?”—“That is not a question for me to decide,” said Katharine.—“Promises,” he continued, “rash promises, may they not be altered by time?”—Katharine was silent.—“May they not be retracted by mutual consent?” he added more eagerly.—“Yes, certainly,” replied Katharine.—He caught her hand: “Miss Ashton, eight years ago I made a promise to you—a promise that upon one subject I never would

trouble you again; is it still binding?" He almost gasped for breath. Katharine's cheek was colourless, her eyes were suddenly dimmed, she thought of Jane. Oh! if she could only tell him at once! She must, she was bound in honour, for it might influence him. "Say that I may speak," he repeated, "or, if the obstacle still exists ——"—"There is an obstacle," said Katharine, interrupting him quickly. —He let her hand fall, and, sinking back into a chair, covered his face with his hands and exclaimed, "Fool that I was to deceive myself."—Katharine continued hurriedly, "I will not pretend to misunderstand you, Mr. Ronaldson, but I would wish to be quite open."—"And tell me that you are, as you always have been, indifferent to me," he said, with a bitter calmness; "I thank you for it."—"Not so," said Katharine, and the blood mantled in her cheek; "but I must be true, honest, for your sake as for my own; I am not in the position you imagine, I am not free."—He started from his seat, and gazed at her wildly.—"I am not free," repeated Katharine, with forced calmness. "I have accepted a situation of what some may term dependence; how long it may last I cannot say or think; but it is binding upon me."—"I cannot understand," he exclaimed, whilst a mingled expression of bewilderment and relief crossed his features. "Dependence! upon whom? and binding! what can be binding as love? Love," he repeated, and he seized her hand, and kept it without resistance, "which has lived through long years upon the fragments of hope, which has never changed or faltered, which even in its despair would rather have chosen death than forgetfulness? Yes, Katharine," he continued, impetuously, "next to my duty to God, you alone have been my object through the whole course of my life. You rejected me in words, but I left you only to love the more.

You rejected me in manner, when I came to you in your hour of sorrow, and you received me with the kindly indifference which is worse than enmity; and I returned to my home to treasure up your image in my heart, and devote all my energies to your service. You withdrew from me more; even your cold letters of business all but ceased, and when compelled to apply to me, you gave me nothing beyond the common-place words due to the most ordinary acquaintance; and I humbled myself by seeking to learn from others what I dared not ask yourself. Your brother told me he believed you to be indifferent, and still, still my love lived, nourished by the shadows of my own imagination. In life you have been my guiding star, in the prospect of death the lingering earthly tie which it was agony to sever, and now you speak to me of claims more binding. Katharine, if there be truth in heaven, or love on earth, there is no claim so binding as mine must be, if only you will admit it. What God hath joined together man cannot, dare not, put asunder." — Katharine's tears fell fast; he pressed her hand to his lips, and added more gently, "Is there no word of hope for me?" — Katharine raised her eyes to his unshrinkingly, and answered, "You shall yourself be the judge, if only you will hear me. Think of me not as Katharine Ashton, holding an independent position in the world, and free to follow my own will, but as engaged in the service of another—one whose claims dated before yours," she added, attempting to smile. "I am Mrs. Forbes' attendant — bound, pledged to her. Stay," she continued, seeing that he was about to interrupt her; "it sounds an absurdity; you think it a wild romantic fancy; it is not that. Under the circumstances of the family I might probably have formed a similar determination, if no

such duty had presented itself, but it has come before me with the most urgent claim. Mrs. Forbes is ill, unhappy, I must not say more; I owe her a debt of gratitude for years of kindness, far more than kindness; it was she that brought me fully to the service of God. To leave her now would be cruelty; to think of really helping her except in the position I have undertaken would be folly. I have promised to be her servant, and that promise I must keep before all others. Simply and entirely her servant," she added, "bound to wait upon her, willing to accept her wages, and pledged to remain with her so long as my services are essential. This is my situation; you will see at once how much in many ways it may lead you to alter your views."

During Katharine's explanation, Charles had gradually become paler and paler, and as she concluded the last sentence, and turned to him, expecting a reply, he sat down and buried his face in his hands. Katharine saw the ashy hue of his forehead and was frightened. A glass of water was on the table, and she put it to his lips. He leant his head back in the chair, and his eyes closed. After a few moments he looked up again, and, smiling, said, "I had a horrible dream that you had left me, but you are still near."—"Near, if you will let me be," said Katharine, timidly.—He gazed at her with an expression of reverence mingled with the most intense affection, and motioning to her to sit down by him, said, "I did not know I could have been so weak, but it is from happiness."—"And you do not care?" said Katharine.—He drew a long breath, and answered earnestly, "Care—when you give me hope? God be thanked for the mercy I have so little deserved."—"But you understand it—you understand it quite," repeated Katharine, anxiously;

"that I am really to be her servant; that Colonel Forbes, that every one will look upon me as such; that I cannot leave her, for it may be very long; I trust you understand" — "That we are one," he said, interrupting her eagerly: "in life and in death that we are one; let me hear it from your own lips;" and Katharine, though her voice trembled, put her hand in his, and answered clearly and audibly, "One, if still you will have it so."

CHAPTER LXI.

A NEW phase in Katharine Ashton's life. In a little room, adjoining Jane's dressing-room at Maplestead, she was seated at work. It was an autumn day, clear but cold; a fire blazed on the hearth, the sun shone brightly into the apartment; the view without over the park, with a glimpse of the long beech avenue, was quieting, perhaps imposing in its stateliness; the view within—the work-table, the books, the prints covering the walls—was cheerful and very home-like. Katharine worked as diligently now, when she was making frocks for little Philip and Lucy, as she had formerly done for her own little niece and nephew. She was a person always to put her heart into what she was doing, not for the sake of the work, but of Him who gave it her to do. Yet there was pleasure also, great pleasure in working for Jane; in feeling, as Katharine could not but feel, that she was able to soothe her in hours of suffering, and help to restore peace to her mind. She had been at Maplestead now three weeks, but the life had become so natural to her that she might have ima-

gined it rather three months. She looked back upon the time preceding, full as it was of excitement, pain, and business, as upon the disturbed memories of some troubled period of childhood or of youth; so separated it seemed from the quiet tenor of her present existence. Yet, whilst she was thus calmly employed in that still, solitary little room at Maplestead, John, and Selina, and the children (who had become so dear to her that separation from them was as the severance of a limb from the body), were sailing over the wide seas, to seek their fortunes in a distant land, carrying with them the last link which bound her to the sunny days of childhood. Sometimes Katharine allowed herself to recall all that had passed in detail. There were many lessons to be learnt from it of faith and gratitude. She had been spared much, even when expecting to suffer most. First doubtless, owing to her engagement. That happiness increased day by day, though many might have murmured at the restraint which circumstances imposed upon her. One of Katharine's chief wishes was that it should not be made public; that indeed no one should be told of it, except Mrs. Ronaldson, and her friends Mr. and Mrs. Reeves; the former, of course, had a claim of duty; with regard to the latter, Katharine felt that guidance and counsel might be necessary to her in her untried position, and she was anxious to put them in possession of the facts, which would enable them to direct her rightly. Her brother and Selina were to be told immediately before they sailed, but Katharine very naturally shrank from putting herself in the power of Selina's raillery, and was aware also that she could in no way depend upon her discretion; and it was discretion which just then was most needed. If Mrs. Forbes were to learn how she

was circumstanced, the dread of possibly interfering with her happiness would, Katharine knew, in all probability so distress her, that the plan for her benefit must fall to the ground. And above all things it was most important just then to keep her mind at rest. She was so shaken by her last illness, that anything like excitement, whether painful or pleasurable, might have most fatal consequences. John and Selina were therefore informed that Katharine was going to Maplestead for a time, and Katharine said also that she was to wait upon Mrs. Forbes; but they were too busy to realise the actual situation she was to hold. They believed she would be there as a kind of temporary nurse, from kindness; and this was so far a relief to John, that he did not feel he was leaving his sister without the protection of a friend.

Yet the secret might probably never have been kept but for the necessity of Charles Ronaldson's leaving Moorlands the day after his explanation. The parting was very painful; but Katharine felt more for Charles than for herself. She had duty and affection for Jane to support her, he had nothing but her assurance that the step she had taken was a duty. Yet he never attempted to alter her resolution; he never even complained when she cautioned him as to self-restraint and reserve until their engagement could be made public, and entreated him not to attempt to see her at Maplestead, but to give her careful notice when he was coming into the neighbourhood, that she might arrange to meet him elsewhere. His mind seemed to have found complete rest for the time in the certainty of Katharine's affection; whether this feeling would bear a long ordeal remained to be proved. Katharine, however, did not try him unnecessarily. She made him see that her promise

to Jane need not necessarily delay their marriage longer than would have been necessary from other circumstances. Respect for her mother's memory would, at all events, have postponed it for many months ; and she willingly allowed that the engagement gave him a claim upon her to which she was bound to attend ; and that she ought on no account to allow a fancied necessity to interfere with it. Katharine was not a person to make herself an unnecessary martyr, and then, as so many do, look round for admiration. She wished to do what she felt to be right, but she did not desire to exaggerate duties. For the future Charles was to be always her first consideration ; and now all that seemed needed, both for him and herself, was patience and a mutual resolution that love should not make them selfish.

With this feeling they separated, but to meet again before long. Katharine worked for her brother and Selina up to the last moment of their remaining at Moorlands, and then accompanied them to London, where her cousins in Great Russell Street gave them a welcome and a home. Then came ten days of incessant harass, and great pain, which would have seemed to Katharine scarcely endurable, but that Charles managed to be in London at the same time, and shared all her cares. It was then that John was told of her engagement, and in the fulness of his satisfaction he evinced a warmth of affection, which Katharine had before supposed to be entirely lost to her. Selina also gave her cordial thanks for past kindness and wishes for future happiness ; and when at last the bitter moment of separation arrived, and Katharine's heart seemed well-nigh breaking, as the children clung to her, and entreated her to follow them, she was soothed by hearing John whisper in her ear that they might

carry with them good spirits and bright hopes, but they were leaving their greatest treasure behind them.

They were pleasant last words to treasure in the memory, after all the hard ones which had preceded them, and peacefully though very mournfully they lingered in Katharine's recollection, as she stood watching the crowded ship, and waving her handkerchief, till all individual objects were lost in the distance.

The world was very desolate to Katharine at that moment, even with Charles by her side. Perhaps she realised then even more than before, the barrier that she had raised between herself and immediate freedom. Jane was needing her at Maplestead, and it was necessary that she should keep her engagement; Charles had urgent business claiming his attention in the North; and the very day that the ship sailed for Australia, they separated once more at the railway station, when to meet again neither could say, but trying to persuade themselves that constant correspondence would at least soothe the aching regret, which both felt would only cease when they should be at liberty to be always together.

And Katharine was now Mrs. Forbes' lady's maid. How strange it seemed to every one! how much more strange than to herself! She might have appeared a most consummate actress, for every part in life which she undertook became real to her. She could answer Jane's bell, speak of her as her mistress, and receive her instructions; she could stand aside respectfully for Colonel Forbes to pass, listen with a most unmoved countenance to his hasty words, and deliver his orders. She could assist the housekeeper if required, in domestic arrangements, and consult with her as to little plans for Jane's comfort. She could in fact do every duty which might at any time be required of a lady's

maid, not only without causing any feeling of awkwardness to others, but actually without feeling it herself. She was Katharine Ashton through everything, and not to be altered by any outward change of circumstances. It was impossible to offend her, she had no false dignity to make her vulnerable. If Crewe gave himself unpleasant airs, it was a cause of regret for him, but not for herself; if some of her old Rilworth acquaintances looked at her with pity and perhaps a little mixture of pride, she could smile at their total misconception of her feelings. But she could not be annoyed with them, because it was not possible they should understand her. She had learnt to live so entirely above the world that whenever a thought crossed her mind of having lowered herself, or that others would think she had done so, she could put it aside in an instant, by considering herself not as working for man, but God; not as a member of a human society, but as a fellow-citizen with the saints, and of the household of God. Doubtless there was much of this to be attributed to the disposition born with her. Some persons are naturally much more simple than others, but like all other graces, simplicity is unquestionably to be acquired; and Katharine had laboured with the one talent which it had pleased God to bestow upon her, until through His grace it had become five.

A bell rang, and Katharine laid down her work and went to answer it. Jane was in her own morning room, the scene of that eventful arrangement of the books which had caused Katharine so much annoyance. Jane had rallied very considerably in the last few weeks; indeed ever since Katharine's offer of being with her. Her mind seemed to rest upon the idea as a stay, and any little inconveniences which before had fretted her, were put aside

with the thought, "When Katharine comes, all will be right." It was very pleasant to see the smile which passed over her features when Katharine entered; it told of such a thankful trust; yet it was followed just now with a sigh of weariness. "I rang, Katharine, to ask if you would be kind enough to see if any one is going into Rilworth. I want some note paper; just look," and she pointed to a rather closely-written paper, "this is to be copied six times."—"I am afraid it will tire you, ma'am, very much," said Katharine. "Must it all be done to-day?"—"To-day or to-morrow if I can; that is, Colonel Forbes did not exactly ask me, but he said he should like to have it done."—"Sitting up will make your side ache, ma'am. Don't you think you had better lie down a little and rest now?" Katharine moved to the sofa and arranged the pillow. "You would make me so very lazy, Katharine," said Jane; but she put her head back and owned that it ached rather. "I do not think you have finished the book which you said Colonel Forbes wished you to read, ma'am. Might I fetch it and finish it to you?"—"I had quite forgotten it," exclaimed Jane, quickly, and in a tone of alarm. "Yes, pray get it; only what shall I do about the papers?"—"I suppose they are private," said Katharine.—"Oh! no; they are merely some political circulars to be sent to a few people."—"It would be very easy for me to copy them if I might be allowed," said Katharine. Jane looked a little inclined to agree, but after a moment's thought, shook her head, and said it would not do.—"Then perhaps I had better go and order the note paper," said Katharine. "Mr. Crewe is going into Rilworth I know."—"There are a good many commissions in my memorandum-book," said Jane, "if you don't think he will be put out by having to attend to them."—Katharine

smiled, and said she would try to soften his heart; and once more putting Jane's pillow in a comfortable position, and placing a little table with a work-basket by her side, she went away, Jane entreating her as she closed the door not on any account to forget the book. Katharine went down to the housekeeper's room. She was looking over the linen, and adding to the inventory, and good-humoured though she usually was, yet on this occasion she was a little inclined to be cross. Katharine inquired if she could tell where Mr. Crewe was likely to be found. "Indeed, Miss Ashton, I don't know—four, five, six—I'm sure there's one of the dusters missing." Katharine picked it up from the floor. "Thank you; that's one set right. Just give me those others on the round table, will you?"—Katharine did as she was directed, and inquired if all the linen she saw there was to be entered in the book.—"To be sure it is, every bit, and a good long day's work it will be for me to-day, and to-morrow, and the next day too."—"You had better let me come and help you by-and-by," said Katharine, "I am used to writing."—"Well, I must say that would be very good-natured of you. It is a terrible job if one has not help, and the upper housemaid has a desperate headache, so I began without her."—"I will come, if you like, when Mrs. Forbes goes out for her drive," said Katharine. "Did you say you had seen Mr. Crewe lately?"—"Not for the last half-hour; he was in here scolding something about one of the grooms; but I haven't seen him since. Let James go and look for him."—"No, I won't trouble any one, thank you," replied Katharine. "I dare say I shall find him in the servants' hall. Shall you be ready for me about half-past two o'clock. I think Mrs. Forbes will go out about that time to-day. She was too late yesterday."—

"If the Colonel means to drive her she won't get out before half-past three," said the housekeeper; "but that's not your concern nor mine, Miss Ashton. Come when you will, I shall be glad to have your help."—Katharine proceeded to the servants' hall, meeting on the way a kitchen-maid, a poor girl whose mother was dying in the village. "Susan, I saw your mother this morning," she said, "when I took Miss Lucy and Master Philip out for a walk. I could not stop an instant; but she was a little better, and sent her love to you."—"Thank you, miss, very much;" and the kitchen-maid dropped a curtsy to the grand lady's maid, and thought how different she was from Mlle. Laurette.—"You have not seen Mr. Crewe anywhere, have you?" asked Katharine.—"No, miss; couldn't I go and look for him for you?"—"I won't trouble you," was again Katharine's answer; and the politeness was as strange and as pleasant to the little kitchen-maid as the sympathy.

Mr. Crewe was found in the servants' hall, reading the *Times*, the only difference between him and his master in this respect was that his newspapers were always a day old. He had just the same nonchalant air on these occasions as Colonel Forbes, and did not suffer himself to be at all more disturbed by the knowledge that any person was wishing to speak to him. "I think, Mr. Crewe, you are going into Rilworth this afternoon," said Katharine, standing at the door.—"I think, Miss Ashton, I am."—"There is a list of commissions, which perhaps you will be good enough to attend to for Mrs. Forbes and your master. The books Colonel Forbes would wish to have particularly this evening. I will leave the list on the table. The things are to be sent to the Bear, and the carrier will bring them over." And before Crewe had time to

reply either civilly or uncivilly, Katharine was gone. How Crewe hated her! She never was cross, or flighty, or troublesome; she never came in his way, or even asked him to do disagreeable things. Even now she had taken away the only cause of complaint he could find as regarded the commissions. Laurette had always insisted upon his loading himself with brown-paper parcels. Now that Katharine was come, they were either given in charge to one of the other servants, or sent by the carrier. He had no opportunity of teasing her, except when they dined together in the house-keeper's room, and then Katharine kept up such a pleasant conversation with Mrs. Brown, and was so civilly indifferent to himself, that he never could tell whether she noticed his manner, and certainly he never felt that he had any power over her. It was intensely irritating to be forced to respect her, when hitherto the chief amusement in his rather dull life at Maplestead had been alternately tormenting and flattering the unfortunate lady's maids who were in attendance upon Mrs. Forbes. Katharine was perfectly unapproachable, and Crewe's dislike increased in exact proportion to the approbation of the rest of the household.

Katharine of necessity reciprocated the feeling to a certain extent; Crewe was the only really disagreeable person she was obliged in any way to associate with, and she could never feel thoroughly at ease when he was present; but happily for her she saw nothing of him except at meal-times. Her fear of him was very different from that with which she regarded Colonel Forbes, who, whatever might be his irritability of temper, never forgot that he was a gentleman, and that as such all women had a certain claim upon his protection. The pain he caused her was for Jane, not for herself, and cer-

tainly Jane was the greater sufferer. Colonel Forbes might be haughty to Katharine, but it would have lowered his dignity in his own eyes to be pettish with her, as he was with his wife. Katharine however, took great care never to come in his way, and never, if it could be avoided, to remind him of former days. The tone which she had adopted, or rather which had been natural to her, when first she proposed to enter his service, was always retained. It was that which had weighed with him when agreeing to receive her. He had said to Jane when first the subject was discussed between them, that Miss Ashton seemed to know her position. He was afraid she might be romantic, but she was of a good steady age, and had seen enough of the world to know that such folly would not do for every-day life; and if she really was in reduced circumstances, why it might be as well for her to enter a service like theirs, which was of a superior kind. He had no objection to her trying the place, if she did not give herself airs; if she knew how to keep her proper distance; but he could have no sentimentalities. If she came to Maplestead, she would be Mrs. Forbes' maid, and she must be content to be treated as such. He worked himself up into a fit of indignation; — as if Katharine had ever expressed a wish to be anything else! and he touched his wife's sensitive feelings to the quick, and made her feel as though it would be impossible to allow Katharine to accept a situation in which there would be such jealousy of her every action. But when, yielding to this feeling, she began to suggest obstacles, Colonel Forbes turned completely round, blamed her for encouraging Katharine in pride, insisted upon it that in her circumstances the higher grades of service offered the best possible prospects of happiness, and at length from the mere

spirit of contradiction, did the very thing which Jane and Katharine were anxious he should do.

Katharine went to his room to fetch the book which Jane wanted. She knocked at the door, was told to come in, and found Colonel Forbes busied in conversation with Mr. George Andrews. Very much perplexed was Mr. Andrews whenever he met Katharine now. She had become an amphibious animal, and he was always under the fear that by allowing her to approach too near, she might drag him from the position which he had attained, and in which he by no means felt himself secure. His good-nature suggested to him to shake hands, his dignity warned him that it would be safer to bow, and dignity gained the victory; and most solemn was the reverence he bestowed upon her. "Might I take this book, sir, for Mrs. Forbes?" inquired Katharine, seeing the missing volume on the table. —"That book? let me see;" he took it from her, and turned to Mr. Andrews. "It is worth reading. I advise you to get it, Andrews. It treats the question of Reform more cleverly than anything I have seen yet. Has not your mistress finished it, Miss Ashton?"—"No, sir, she was wishing to do so."—Mr. Andrews expressed a great desire to peruse the volume, and turned over the pages, murmuring to himself as he read the heads of the different chapters: "Very important—highly interesting—new views," &c.—Katharine, the most patient of attendants, stood at the door, waiting till he had done with it. "I thought your mistress was to have finished it this morning," said Colonel Forbes. —"She was going to do so, sir, directly. I think she has not many pages to finish, she read a good deal last night before she went to bed."—"Mrs. Forbes is a politician I see," said Mr. Andrews; but Colonel Forbes never liked personal remarks upon his wife

of any kind, and did not reply to the observation, but merely said, impatiently, to Katharine, "Well! you may take it, Miss Ashton, only tell Mrs. Forbes it must be sent away this afternoon."—"My mistress is going to read it directly, sir, after she has finished some writing she has to do."—"Tell her to put away her writing, unless she doesn't care about the book, which I suppose is the case," he murmured, pettishly, to himself.—"I think my mistress would like to finish the book, sir, if I might take it to her; the writing was only copying."—"Copying! oh! yes, I remember. Circulars, Andrews, just a few of them for our own private friends. Here is one!"—Mr. Andrews perused the circular diligently, and Colonel Forbes continued, "It would be well to have a good many more, there is nothing like pre-occupying the ground."—"Nothing like it," repeated Mr. Andrews. "Excellent, indeed," he added, laying the papers on the table, "wonderfully to the point; really, Colonel, you do manage to put things in the most striking way."—Colonel Forbes winced a little. Even after so many years of acquaintance he could never quite get over the familiarity of Mr. Andrews' manner. "It is merely a simple explanation of my views," he said, carelessly; "but it may be as well to let people know them. Mrs. Forbes has six of these papers written, you say?" he added, speaking to Katharine.—"She will have by post time, sir. If there was nothing private in them, perhaps I might be allowed to help."—A gleam of satisfaction crossed Colonel Forbes' countenance. "Well, perhaps, yes, I think that is a good notion. Then I shall reckon upon twelve?"—Katharine was not in the least prepared for this, but she assented, and that willingly. Anything to save Jane the weariness of so much writing! "And if my mistress has time, sir, she may finish the book too?" she said.—"Of course, only

don't forget to let me have it by post time."—Katharine retreated, first making a curtsy to Mr. Andrews. A little compunction touched him then, and he inquired if she had any news of her brother.—"None, sir, yet, thank you; except from the pilot who took the vessel down the Channel."—"No tidings of poor Mrs. John," said Mr. Andrews, laughing; "I wonder how she and sea-sickness will agree."—A short cough from Colonel Forbes recalled him to his dignity. He certainly never was safe when he ventured beyond its protection; and he drew back in a moment, and with a patronising "Good morning, Miss Ashton, I am glad to see you looking so well and comfortable," retreated into the safe sphere of politics.

CHAPTER LXII.

THAT copying of the circular was but a trifle, but it worked considerable effects. Colonel Forbes had never felt quite comfortable when making his wife write for him. He knew the attitude was painful after a time, and he was not at all sure that it was good for her general health; but the question was between his comfort and hers, and as usual hers was to give way.

His conscience was relieved by Katharine's offer, and he took great advantage of it—more a great deal than he had any right to do, more than any other person in Katharine's situation would probably have been willing to bear. But love makes all things smooth, and Katharine would have laboured ten times more to save Jane trouble, or give her a moment's pleasure. And it was very useful too, in other ways,

to be thus brought more in contact with Colonel Forbes. It gave her almost insensibly to herself, and certainly to him, a share in his interests, and so softened his feeling towards her. He did not look at her now in an antagonistic point of view ; his first thought when he saw her was not what he had to complain of, but how he could make her useful. He never praised her, and scarcely thanked her, but he endured her, and would have felt her loss if she had gone away ; and that with a man of his temperament was a great point gained.

Now and then it even crossed Katharine's mind that she might be making herself too useful, raising up additional barriers between herself and the freedom which eventually she hoped to attain ; but again her sober judgment of duty came to her aid, and taking the first step which presented itself to her as right, she left the second to God. Jane was better — able to see more of her children — to attend a little to the poor — to drive out, and occasionally see her friends ; but there was nothing like real permanent strength to be seen. Katharine was very clear-sighted on this point ; all the more so because she felt how much her own happiness might depend upon it. Charles was extremely good and patient : he never complained, or put forward his own wishes selfishly, but as weeks went on, Katharine could see that he was pained at their long separation, and anxious for an excuse to come to Rilworth, and unhappy if ever an obstacle was suggested. And when this was the case so early in their engagement, she could not but fear what the effect of the prolonged delay might be upon his spirits. Such a state of things naturally brought up again the question of comparative duty to him and to Jane ; but that was looking into the future. They could not be married yet, even if she were free, and

doubtless before the year was expired which feeling for her mother's memory required should elapse, her duty would be made clear to her. In the meantime separation and annoyance had been as it were accepted by them, and must be borne with resignation. For herself she had much to lessen her trial. First, perhaps, that which it is always in human nature to feel, that the suffering was her voluntary choice, not brought upon her by the will of another ; and next the constant, brightening influence of Jane's presence and companionship. For it was companionship, notwithstanding Katharine's watchfulness lest affection should lead either of them to a degree of intimacy which Colonel Forbes might disapprove.

Katharine read aloud well ; she had been carefully taught at Miss Richardson's, and had always been in the habit of reading to her mother. Jane's eyes were weak, and on what she used to call her bad days, the effort of reading to herself was very fatiguing. It was a great pleasure to find that Katharine could go on reading for nearly two hours at a time, without showing any signs of weariness ; and when the book was laid aside, there was a still greater pleasure in hearing her simple, frank, clever remarks, so totally unbiassed by the world, so unlike the trite observations which Jane had been accustomed to in general society. Katharine had cultivated her mind of late years as far as in her lay, because she was anxious to follow the advice of a person whom she respected like Mr. Reeves ; now she found the benefit, as he had told her would be the case. She was the better fitted by it for the position in which the Providence of God had placed her. Such intercourse was like a new sense to Jane, and now and then she was induced to bring forward Katharine's doubts and questions to her

husband, not saying whose they were (for that might have jarred upon him) but putting them before him as he liked to hear them, in an humble, submissive manner, which allowed him fully to feel his own superiority. A little conversation of this kind was very sweet to her after the perpetual contradiction to which she had been subjected. She wondered why she had so seldom before been able to discuss books with him. But there was a difference between bringing forward her own opinions or convictions, and those of another. Her own were more precious to her, more important, and to hear them contradicted or ridiculed seemed to widen the breach between them. Katharine's were sufficiently like her own to be interesting, but not sufficiently so to make her unhappy, if they were not deemed worthy of attention.

And there was good for Katharine also in this intercourse. A great difference exists between minds trained in the active and the passive schools of life, by action or by endurance. Busy minds too often want softness, refinement, elevation; there is little poetry in them, or that which they possess is only latent, crushed beneath the load of present interests; and so too often they lack that spirituality which is poetry in its truest and highest sense. There is danger in this. We may work, even for God, so as to forget Him, and very good therefore it is for us if, when forbidden the leisure to pause ourselves, we are permitted to gaze, though but for awhile, upon those whose existence is spiritual rather than material, and who bring before us a faint image of the undying, yet ever-resting love of Heaven.

Jane's life was, even now, in Katharine's eyes, like that of an angel—as pure, as raised above all worldly hopes or fears. If at times she grieved

bitterly over her husband's coldness, or thought anxiously of her children's future lot, her fears and sorrows were fast becoming absorbed in the daily, hourly contemplation of the far dearer love, to the enjoyment of which she was, in God's Mercy, hastening. It was repose to sit by her, to hear her speak, to watch the bright, calm smile, which so often, even in the midst of suffering, lingered on her worn face. Even whilst exerting herself still at times beyond her strength in attending to the necessary duties of her station, there was no forgetfulness, no absorption in earthly cares. It might have seemed that an invisible hand was ever before her, pointing to the dial plate of Time, and warning her that she was about to hear the summons to Eternity.

Yes, it was very good for Katharine to live in such a presence. It was a lesson to be remembered through life, to elevate her mind in sorrow, and sober it in joy. And fully and thankfully she realised its blessings. Not all her love for Charles, her glad hopes for the future, her peaceful yet sorrowing regrets for the past, could make her insensible to the fact that the Providence of God was placing her where, for the good of her own soul, it was best that she should be. If she had in a degree sacrificed her own for another's happiness, the sacrifice was a hundredfold repaid. The quiet life in Jane's room—the sight of her childlike yet intense devotion, her unresisting submission, her wonderful unselfishness—was more powerful in its effect upon Katharine's mind than the most eloquent sermon or the most holy words of meditation. Essentially practical herself, she required, in order to be influenced, the sight of practice in others. Mere poetry, enthusiasm, or abstraction, would have had no power over her. However beautiful in appearance,

she would in a moment have discovered the element wanting to their reality. But there could be no doubt with Jane. Religion was in her every thought, word, and action. It could no more have been separated from her existence, than the air she breathed, and, when withheld from expressing itself outwardly, it worked inwardly, effacing, day by day, the remaining stains of human infirmity, and tracing upon her fair, calm features, the indescribable beauty of the world of purity in which her thoughts so fondly dwelt.

By living with Jane, Katharine learnt that there were heights in religion within her own reach, but which hitherto she had only imagined attainable in the entire seclusion of a solitary life.

And Colonel Forbes lived with Jane also. What effect had such an intercourse upon him?

He had no key to the language of her soul, and he did not understand her.

CHAPTER LXIII.

KATHARINE had been at Maplestead three months. She had during that period seen Charles once, for about two hours only, when he came to his aunt's for a day, and she had been able to meet him by appointment at the rectory. He had talked of coming again in six weeks, and Katharine was beginning to expect him. She was working as usual in her own room, a little troubled in her mind at not having heard from him that morning as she had anticipated, and wondering whether silence meant that he was coming. The two children were with her, for her room was a favourite resort with them. They had a nursery governess, a Swiss,

only lately arrived, and it was rejoicing to them to escape from a stranger to one whom they had so long known. "Mademoiselle reads so oddly," said Philip, "I don't a bit understand her, and she can't teach me Latin at all, and I want to learn Latin very much."—"To be a man," added Lucy. "Miss Ashton, Philip always wishes he was a man."—"He will have his wish one of these days," said Katharine, smiling, "if he should live long enough, but he must have patience."—"Mademoiselle has not patience," said Philip; "she got into a great passion this morning all about nothing."—"No, not about nothing," said Lucy, whose love of truth was remarkable; "it was because you laughed at her, Philip."—"I could not help it," replied Philip; "nobody could. You know, Miss Ashton, she reads Sare for Sir."—"That is her foreign way of pronouncing," observed Katharine; "but do you ever read to her, Master Philip?"—"Sometimes; but she was reading a story to me, then. You know I read to mamma generally."—"Only it makes mamma's head ache," said Lucy. "It ached so much this morning, that we could not read at all," continued Philip; "and we didn't yesterday, nor the day before."—"Except the Bible," said Lucy; "you forget."—"No, I don't; but we didn't read the Bible, mamma read it to us," replied Philip, hastily. Katharine became a little thoughtful. She knew enough of education to be aware that this irregular training was very prejudicial. "Well, you must go back to the schoolroom now," she said. "It is mamma's luncheon time, and I must go and see that she has it comfortably."—"And ask her if she will take me out in the carriage with her this afternoon," said Philip. "I don't like walking with mademoiselle, at all."—"We needn't walk; we may play in the garden if we like," said Lucy.—

"Yes, but I like the carriage best; it goes along so fast."—"The pony would go faster," said Lucy.—"I don't care for the pony, because mamma won't let me go without a leading rein."—"That is what I like," said Lucy, "it is so safe."—"But you are a girl," exclaimed Philip, contemptuously. "Boys never go with leading reins."—"Except when their mammas wish it," suggested Katharine. "But now, Master Philip, you really must run away, and I will remember to ask about the carriage." The children departed, and Katharine, after lingering for a few moments in thought, went to the morning room.

It was one of Jane's bad days, as Philip had said she had a very bad head-ache, and she had no appetite. Katharine placed a little table by her side, and carved the wing of a partridge for her, and poured out a glass of wine, but she could not touch anything. She seemed very exhausted, and talked of not going out in the afternoon. Katharine did not tease her to eat when she found how her appetite was gone, but rang to have the things taken away, and then made Jane lie down, and offered to read to her; but her head was aching too much, and Katharine, at her request, took her work instead, and sat down by her. She half hoped that Jane might sleep, but she did not seem inclined, and they began talking about the children.—"It vexes me so, sometimes," said Jane, "to have them so little with me. This morning I sent them away, and so I did yesterday, and the day before; I can't read to them at all scarcely, now, it tires me so."—"It must be worse reading to children than to grown-up people," said Katharine, "because they cannot be kept quiet."—"No, and that distracts one: but I can't bear hearing many people read the Bible, it is one of my fidgets; Colonel Forbes reads beautifully," she

added.—“I can imagine that,” replied Katharine; “he has such a good voice.”—“And he reads with such reverence,” said Jane, in a sorrowful tone, as her mind travelled back to those past years when one of her great pleasures had been pointing out to him her favourite passages in the Prophecies, and listening to him whilst he read them aloud, or spoke of them with an admiration of their beauty, which she had fondly believed to proceed from the heart, as well as the intellect.—“He has not much time for reading now,” she added.—“Perhaps he does not know that you would like it,” observed Katharine.—“Oh! yes, he does, he must know it,” said Jane; “and yet,” she continued with a smile, “I dare say I never said much about it; I was dreadfully shy in those days.”—“I wish he would read to the children in the morning,” observed Katharine; “it would be much better, ma’am, than your doing it.”—“He has not time,” said Jane; “and he does not understand children, he would be fretted by them; and I could not talk before him; not that I talk much now, I am too tired.”—“I should have thought Colonel Forbes liked reading out,” said Katharine; “most people enjoy doing what they do well.”—“I think he would like it, if it came into his head; at least, it depends upon the kind of reading.”—Katharine longed to say, why don’t you ask him to read; but she was afraid it might appear a liberty. “What are you thinking of, Katharine?” said Jane, after a short silence.—Katharine smiled, and blushed a little: she had been thinking what she should feel if the time should ever come that she was afraid to ask Charles to read the Bible to her.—“If I were not a coward!” continued Jane, thoughtfully; “that has been my bane through life. Katharine, I am very glad you are not one.”—“I could not say that I am not,” said Katharine; I

think I am a great coward, in somethings much more than you were, ma'am, when first I knew you."—"Ah! but I was free then," said Jane; and after a moment's thought, she added, "cowardice comes with love."—"But it cannot stay," said Katharine. "Perfect love casteth out fear."—"That is not human love," said Jane, earnestly; "there must be some fear, I think, where there is imperfection."—"And fear creates fear," said Katharine. An expression of pain crossed Jane's face; she was silent again for a few moments, then she said, "Katharine, if I were to begin my life over again, I would try above all things never to give way to cowardice; it has done me much harm, and others also," she added in a lower tone. Katharine hesitated a little before she replied: "I suppose it is possible to overcome it whether at the beginning or the end of life."—"It is possible to be resigned to its effects," said Jane; "but I do not think it is possible to overcome it, or at least I do not think it would be wise to attempt it, because it would be unnatural and jarring."—"And so things must remain as they are," observed Katharine, sadly but timidly: she had seldom before approached so near the subject of Jane's private feelings towards her husband. A faint smile passed over Jane's face as she turned to Katharine affectionately and said, "Don't fret for me, Katharine: it is good for me,—and," she added solemnly, "in God's mercy, I think it may be good for him: I have great trust."—Katharine could not echo the words. "His heart," continued Jane, speaking quickly, as if anxious to pour forth all that was working in her mind, now that the barrier which had kept it in was for a season broken down, "has never been touched by real sorrow. I think he will feel it when I am gone; he will know then the love that he has lost with me."—Tears dimmed

Katharine's eyes; it was a mournful hope, after years of what ought to have been happiness in married life; and again she thought of Charles and her own prospects. "It will come," continued Jane, her cheek tinged with the faint crimson of excitement; "the change will come; not yet,—not that I shall see it, but it will surely come; and when he is restored to me again, it will be with the love of which I dreamt in childhood, and for which my heart has yearned through life. Once, Katharine, I prayed that it might be permitted to me now to see it and rejoice; but the prayer has been denied, doubtless in great mercy. It must be good that I should bear the punishment of my own failings."—"Yours, dear Mrs. Forbes!" exclaimed Katharine, eagerly; "oh! who can ever have had a claim to happiness in married life, if not you?"—"Ah! Katharine, you do not know; you have seen but the outside; whether, if I had been different, he would not have been different also, who can say? and besides, I did err in many ways. I had constitutional defects, and I yielded to them."—"You were very timid and reserved," said Katharine.—"And cold from timidity," continued Jane; "I never helped him on; he often told me so, and he was right, quite right."—"But," Katharine hesitated.—"Say what you think, dear Katharine," said Jane, "you cannot hurt me; I am past the power of being wounded," she added, trying to smile.—"It was not against you," replied Katharine; "it was an excuse. I was going to say, that in your place, I should have been quite as timid, and, in consequence, as cold."—"No, you would not, Katharine; or if you felt yourself inclined to give way, you would have struggled against the weakness. In my case there was no struggle: reserve was in my nature, and I yielded to it. Even before

I learnt to fear, I was reserved.”—“But you showed your feeling in action,” said Katharine.—“In obedience,” replied Jane; “but obedience is not necessarily love, and even if it were so, it is not sufficient. A man’s nature requires that his affections should be brought into active exercise, not permitted to lie dormant. The spring is not quick and ever-flowing like a woman’s; and if it is covered up, it will become dry.”—“But, surely,” said Katharine, “with a wife and children, a man’s affection can never be said to be dormant.”—“Not until his wife has spoilt him,” said Jane, very gravely; and the words carried Katharine back to the unconscious prophecy which she herself had uttered on Jane’s wedding day.—“People have said to me, laughingly,” continued Jane, “that I spoilt my husband. They little knew the pang which the words brought. Yes, Katharine, I acknowledge humbly, without excuse, that I have spoilt him. Because I dreaded to see him fretted, and shrank from the slightest appearance of contradiction, I put out of his way everything which might annoy him, however necessary it might have been for him to see it. I did not give him the opportunity of consulting my wishes, because I seldom or never expressed them. I made him think I could live without him, because I never told him in what my own inner life consisted, and so never put it into his mind to wish to share it. It was all wrong—all a mistake—I hope it was not sinful; but it was a great error, it was fear.”—She paused—and her breath came quick and faint with the exertion she had made in speaking. There was a silence of some seconds—then Katharine said, “I can scarcely fancy Colonel Forbes a man to bear any different treatment.”—“Because you see him as he is now,” said Jane; “when for years he has never, in his private life,

known what it was to be contradicted ; but, Katharine, it was not so once. There was the germ of the same disposition, but it might have been very differently nurtured, and it would have brought forth different fruit. He did care for the things for which I cared in those first days ; and if I had not been so sensitively fastidious, if I had been able to bear a hasty tone, or an impatient look, he might have cared for them still ; he might have been angry for an instant, but it would have passed off ; and if then, instead of a chilling timidity, which I was conscious of, and which made me wretched, but which I seldom or never heartily strove to overcome, I could have shown him what I really felt, he would not only have forgotten, but even have loved me the more because I taught him how to bring out his own feelings. Men like that," she continued. "The more they feel themselves drawn off to the world by business or politics, the more they value everything which shows them that their higher nature is still living within them. They have not the power to bring it out for themselves ; at least after they have passed beyond youth ; it is a woman's quicker impulse which must do that, and if this is wanting, it too often sinks, and is buried."—"Never to rise again?" asked Katharine, repenting the words as they escaped her ; but she need not have feared. Jane looked at her quietly and fixedly, and said in a voice which did not falter, "Yes, Katharine, to rise, but at the call of God, in sorrow and in death."

CHAPTER LXIV.

KATHARINE recurred to that conversation often in her own mind. Jane was right, there had been

an error in her life. Whether it were in human nature to have rectified it, Katharine was sometimes inclined to doubt. Cold and fretful as Colonel Forbes now was, she could scarcely imagine the possibility of any amount of warmth of manner, or any claim upon his sympathy, however judicious, rousing him from his selfishness. Yet there were symptoms which, although they perplexed her, made her believe that she did not thoroughly understand him; and that there might be feelings to be touched with which as yet she was unacquainted. He was always more cross than usual when Jane was particularly ill; there was a cause for this in the interruption to his own comfort; but then it also implied that his comfort in some degree depended upon her. He was never satisfied unless she approved everything he did. This again was the result of his impatience of contradiction, but it was also a proof that he had a respect for her opinion. He was always urging her to go into society, or to receive company. This was done very selfishly, but it showed that he could not rest satisfied unless she shared his interests. He was not indifferent to his wife; he might complain, and fret, and tease her; he did so perpetually; but he evidently could not live without her. Katharine did not comprehend this till after she had been some time at Maplestead, and not thoroughly then until after her conversation with Jane. The idea that there had been an error in what might be called Colonel Forbes' training threw a new light upon his character. If he had in any degree been made selfish, perhaps the fault might be unmade. A very difficult task it would be, with all his natural inclinations working against the attempt; but still with watchfulness and prudence, and the aid of

Him without whom all such efforts are vain, not to be set aside as hopeless.

Katharine called little Philip to her one morning, about a week after she had talked to Jane, and inquired whether he had been to his mamma for his Scripture reading. Philip's answer was, as she had expected, in the negative; "Mamma was not up, and they were to read in the afternoon."—"Mamma ought to go out for a drive in the afternoon;" said Katharine; "and when she comes in she will be so tired. I wish she would let me come and read for her."—"I shouldn't like that," said Philip, bluntly, "I don't like any one to read to me but mamma."—"Or papa," said Katharine, "he reads so beautifully."—"Did you ever hear him?" asked Philip. "Sometimes, a little, but mamma says he does, and she must know."—"He never reads the Bible," said Philip.—"Oh! yes, I dare say he does often to himself, but it would be very nice to hear him read it aloud, wouldn't it?"—"I don't know," replied the boy, "I would rather hear mamma."—"But then if it tries poor mamma, you would rather hear papa than any one else?"—"I will ask Lucy," said Philip, unable to decide the point without reference to his constant companion and elder sister. They came back together. "Will papa read to us?" asked Lucy, who had gained only a very vague notion of the conversation from Philip's report. "I don't know whether he will," replied Katharine, "but I think it would be very nice to hear him if he had time, because mamma says he reads more beautifully almost than any one, especially in the Bible."—"Papa does a great many things better than other people," said Philip, who had already imbibed the feeling of importance from his father's manner. Katharine did not cordially

respond to the remark, but observed again that it would be very pleasant to have papa to read to them every morning. "I think I shall go and ask him," said Philip, considering. "I don't like to go to the study," said Lucy, "papa always has so many letters to write, and says 'run away,' and then I am frightened."—"That is just like a girl," said Philip, "I shouldn't be frightened if he said 'run away' to me!"—"You would though," replied Lucy; "you sent me the other day when you wanted the sugar plums from Rilworth."—"I don't like asking things for myself," said Philip, "but I don't mind at all for other people."—"Perhaps papa would attend more if you went both together," said Katharine.—"But do you really mean us to go?" asked Lucy. Katharine paused a moment, it was a perplexing question. "If there was no one with him," she said, "I think you might ask him; at least you might say you would like it if he was not busy. Mamma would be sure to like it, because he reads so beautifully." Philip ran off, followed by Lucy, and rushing into the study with one idea prominent in his mind, exclaimed, "Papa, Miss Ashton says you read so beautifully, won't you come and read to us?" Colonel Forbes laid down his pen. "What? my boy, what?"—"Miss Ashton says it would be very nice if you were to read to us instead of mamma."—"What does the child mean? Miss Ashton! impertinence!"—"She says you read better than any one," said Lucy, humbly; "Philip and I wish you would let us hear you."—"I don't understand; run away, children. Lucy, tell Miss Ashton to come to me," and Colonel Forbes placed himself in a magisterial attitude. Katharine obeyed the summons, not quite with a quiet mind. She was afraid of the result of her experiment. She stood by the table, looking Colonel Forbes full in the face,

though her eyes would much more naturally have turned to the ground. "Miss Ashton, my children have come to me with a very strange message; one I am not at all accustomed to. I wish to have no interference with the children, or with their pursuits! I wish you to understand that your office is confined to personal attendance upon Mrs. Forbes."—"I beg your pardon, sir," replied Katharine, with an unmoved face; "I hope there has been some mistake. I had no intention of taking a liberty."—"I trust not. There is nothing to which I am more alive, or which I should more severely reprimand. May I ask what induced you to send my children to me with such a message?"—"Perhaps you would be good enough to tell me what they said, sir," replied Katharine. Colonel Forbes repeated Philip's words, and a smile crossed Katharine's face as she heard them, though she felt herself in a most awkward position. "Master Philip did not quite understand me, sir," she said, "I was saying to him what Mrs. Forbes was saying to me the other day. I hope you will not think it impertinent in me to repeat it."—"No, no! say on, let me hear."—"Mrs. Forbes was observing, sir, how few people she could bear to hear read the Bible, and then she said, that almost the only person she could bear was yourself; and so when Master Philip told me his mamma was not well enough to read to him this morning, I said how nice it would be to hear you read instead, and that put it into his head and Miss Lucy's to ask, and I said I thought they might if there were no one with you." Colonel Forbes listened with a frowning brow, which relaxed a little unconsciously, as Katharine reached the end of her explanation. "Very much like what my little boy said, Miss Ashton. I will thank you not to let me be interrupted again on such foolish errands."—"I

am very sorry, sir, I will take care for the future," and Katharine curtsied and retired. Colonel Forbes resumed his pen for a few moments, then laid it down again, and thought. His work, whatever it might be, seemed unsatisfactory, and after another attempt at completing it, he thrust it aside, and went up stairs to his wife's room. "Jane, may I come in?" and he entered, scarcely waiting for an answer. Katharine was there, but she went away directly. "You are not good for much to-day?" he said, in the cross tone in which he so frequently addressed her when she was later than usual. "Only a little tired," replied Jane, cheerfully. "I mean to get up directly."—"You ought not to have the children with you as you do," he said; "it is very provoking that you should so entirely disregard Dr. Lowe's advice."—"The children have not been with me at all this morning," replied Jane. "I was obliged to send them away, and put off their reading till the afternoon."—"And then you won't be fit to hear them," he replied. "It would be much better to have all that sort of thing over in the morning."—"Yes, if possible, but then if one can't?"—"There ought not to be any can't in a case of health. I would come and read to them myself rather than have all their lessons put out in that way."—"Would you, indeed?"—"Oh! Philip, it would be so very pleasant!" Jane laid her little white hand on his, as it rested on the coverlid, and added with a smile of inexpressible sweetness, "it would remind me of the old times."—"When I had nothing else to do but to read," he said, shortly. "But what is it you read to these children?"—"The second morning lesson generally, at least that is what I have been reading lately. Do you really mean you will read?" she added, looking at him wistfully. "Why, yes, I should not have said

so if I had not intended it; only they must be quiet. I shall ring for them.”—“Send the children here, Miss Ashton.”—“I should like the children to come, Katharine,” were the words simultaneously spoken; and in a few minutes, Philip and Lucy were seated by the bedside, listening with reverent faces, as Colonel Forbes read, certainly with the most perfect tone and expression, the portion of Scripture appointed for the day. “It is better to hear papa read a great deal than old Mr. Norton,” was Lucy’s comment, when he had ended.—“I think papa ought to have been a clergyman,” said Philip.—“Nonsense, child;” but Colonel Forbes turned over the leaves of the Bible, and looking for a particular passage in the Prophecy of Isaiah, pointed it out to his wife, and asked if she remembered their reading it together in the beech tree avenue, on a summer afternoon, before they were married?—Jane remembered it well, and said timidly, “I suppose you could not read it to me again now?”—“We have not had any questions asked us,” said Philip.—“Never mind the questions now, take your chairs away, children,” said Colonel Forbes, quickly. He drew his own arm-chair nearer to the bed. “Go now, darlings, and you shall answer the questions in the afternoon,” said Jane; and the children jumped up on the bed to kiss her, and were dismissed with a hasty: “Make haste, don’t be troublesome, my dears,” by their father, and then he went on reading. Longer he read than was desirable for Jane or at all convenient, for it delayed her dressing till she was obliged to interfere with Katharine’s dinner; but still it was great enjoyment to Jane, and very satisfactory to him. He had given his wife pleasure, instead of her giving it to him. The sensation was very pleasant, and it had all the charm of novelty.

He gave Jane really an affectionate kiss, when he left her, and went back to his work, pleased rather than not at finding that he had lost an hour. He fancied he had been self-denying. That was a mistake; it was selfishness still, but in a better form than what he had lately indulged. It was reverting to what he had been when first he married; when he consulted Jane's wishes because he was in love with her, and so in pleasing her was pleasing himself. His vanity had been flattered;—how indignant he would have been if he had heard himself accused of vanity, though pride he would have acknowledged to any extent!—that put him into good humour, and the effects were seen throughout the day. He had his luncheon with Jane, instead of by himself, and actually consented, at her request, to take Philip for a ride with him, without the leading rein. Jane longed that he should go for a drive with her, but that would have interfered with Philip's pleasure; so she agreed to drive in the same direction in which they were going, though it made her nervous to see her boy on horseback, in order that Philip might show her what a good horseman he was becoming, and Colonel Forbes might have some one to whom he might say what a fine manly little fellow Philip was.

CHAPTER LXV.¹

A NEW state of things was gradually growing up at Maplestead. Katharine thought she saw it, then feared she was mistaken, then hoped again, then doubted whether it could possibly last—it seemed to have so little root. Colonel Forbes read to his

wife every morning. Jane expressed her enjoyment warmly, a great deal more warmly than she would have done some years, or even months before. That little mutual interest brought another, and another; neither of them exactly knew how or why; perhaps no one in the house could have told except Katharine. Jane wanted to work a sofa-cushion for Mrs. Reeves, and Katharine managed to bring the patterns into the room just when she knew Colonel Forbes was likely to be there, so that he might give his opinion, which she knew he would do because he piqued himself so much upon his taste. Jane and he agreed in liking the same; and then Katharine ventured to ask whether, as he would be in Rilworth in the course of the afternoon, he would bring back the lambswool; and the proposal being made at a happy moment, he consented. The work began thus under his sanction, as it were, so of course he took an interest in it, and liked to see how it went on, and this brought him more frequently to Jane's room. He generally found Katharine reading to her, and having made a discovery as to his own talent for reading aloud, he was not indisposed to exhibit it, and would now and then take the book from Katharine's hand and go on himself. Jane and Katharine did not always read political pamphlets when they were alone, and Colonel Forbes's thoughts therefore were a little diverted out of the well-worn channel which he had dug for himself. He was a man of considerable natural taste and refinement, and when he and Jane began to talk about books, as it was natural they should after reading together, the conversation generally ended with a reference to other books. Then came the necessity of having them, and writing for them; and when there was to be a parcel from London, Jane, at Katharine's instigation,

would venture to express some wishes of her own, to ask for something which she had often wanted to have, but which, perhaps, she had fancied it would be a little troublesome to procure. Her expressed wishes suggested to Colonel Forbes the possibility of forestalling those which were unexpressed, and thus there sprang up by degrees some of those little delicate attentions, and signs of thoughtfulness, which are the green-house plants of the domestic garden.

And all this was, humanly speaking, Katharine's doing; the result of incessant watchfulness, and the tact of her unselfish mind. Yet she kept herself always in the background, not from any direct intention, but merely from that sense of fitness and propriety which had distinguished her through life, and so she harmonised with whatever might be going on, and completely forgetting herself, never, for a moment, sought to obtrude in order to bring herself into notice. Colonel Forbes began to remark this at last, and when he found that Katharine might be spoken to safely, he relaxed a little in his manner, and now and then made an observation about her to Jane which did more to produce unity of feeling between them than even personal kindness could have done. Katharine was becoming dearer to Jane every day, and to find that her husband could, even in a remote degree, appreciate what she herself felt so deeply, was an indescribable comfort.

"Miss Ashton here, Mrs. Brown?" inquired Crewe, looking into the housekeeper's room about post time, one morning in the spring succeeding Katharine's first arrival at Maplestead.—"Do you want me, Mr. Crewe?" asked Katharine, appearing from behind the screen which the housekeeper had put up to save herself from rheumatism.—"Only

a letter for you," said Crewe, scanning the address with a look of impertinent curiosity; "the old hand, so I dare say it will be welcome."—A rush of colour covered Katharine's cheek, partly from confusion, but more perhaps from extreme indignation. This was not the first time that Crewe had ventured to observe upon the frequent letters which came to her in the same handwriting.—"I suppose it is because you have so few letters yourself, that you find time to remark upon other people's, Mr. Crewe," said the housekeeper, coming, as she hoped, to Katharine's assistance.—"I take the liberty of keeping my correspondence to myself," retorted Crewe.—"And I should think Miss Ashton would take care to do the same for the future," said the housekeeper; "I thought letters were always private property."—"A cat may look at a king," said Crewe, carelessly. "I never heard yet that the outside of a letter was not property for any one that chose."—Katharine was for a moment tempted to reply, but she never trusted herself to have any thing like an altercation with Crewe, and opening her letter, she began to read it.—"There is enough of it, at least," said Crewe, glancing at the closely written sheet. Katharine folded up her letter, replaced it in the envelope, and saying to the housekeeper that she hoped to return almost immediately, left the room. Crewe burst into a fit of laughter, which still rung in Katharine's ears when she reached her own apartment. This was the hardest trial of all. Coldness she felt she could bear, and misapprehension, and loneliness, but vulgar insult seemed a trial beyond her strength—till the thoughts which now habitually came to her mind in every trial, brought the remembrance that even this suffering had in a far greater degree been endured for her. She could read her letter calmly then,

forgetting Crewe, and not even troubling herself as to the consequences of his curiosity. Where there was nothing of which to be ashamed, there could be no fear of any discovery. Charles hoped to be at Rilworth the next day but one. That was the first sentence of the letter, and it made Katharine's heart beat with a feeling of such delight that she scarcely thought of reading further. He had arranged every thing so as if possible to save her any inconvenience. He hoped, he said, she would go to his aunts for luncheon, for he knew they would like it, but he could not say whether he should be there himself. If, however, she could contrive to have business with Mrs. Reeves, he would follow her there, and they might, he trusted, have the little inner study to themselves, as had several times been managed before, only she must write to Mrs. Reeves and settle it. The concluding sentence of the letter made Katharine smile, for it contained a warning which he was much more likely to need than she was.—“Pray remember that, if we should meet at my aunts', we must be extremely polite to each other. Aunt Priscilla has a most keen eye.”—Katharine hoped that she should not meet him there, notwithstanding her longing to see him. She did not feel she could quite depend upon his discretion; and certainly, unless they wished all Rilworth to know of their engagement, it would not be wise to trust the two old aunts with it. That fear, however, was to be left, like many others, not to reason, but to circumstances. The principal thing, then, for Katharine to consider, was how to carry out the plan he proposed. Jane was very dependent upon her, yet Katharine knew she would not for an instant object, if leave were asked to go into Rilworth for the day. Colonel Forbes was the awful person—he meddled more now with little family arrangements than he had

done before, and in spite of the amendment in some ways, "no" still came more easily to his lips than "yes." Probably he might have found some special employment to occupy her at home, exactly at the time she wished to be away, but that, happily, some new curtains were to be chosen for the morning room, and Katharine was supposed to be a better judge of the proper material than any one else; and thus, when Jane asked whether he happened to be going into Rilworth, and could allow Katharine the back seat of the carriage, a reason was, at the same time assigned for the request, which even he could not find fault with.

"Going out so early, Miss Ashton?" said Crewe, when he saw her in the hall with her bonnet and shawl on, waiting for the carriage. "I am going into Rilworth, Mr. Crewe," replied Katharine, quickly but good-humouredly. "Then I shall have the honour of accompanying you," said Crewe. Katharine did not reply, though perhaps her features betrayed a shade of the great annoyance which she really felt. "You don't waste words, Miss Ashton," said Crewe: "most persons who give themselves out for being civil would have had the grace to say they were glad, whether they felt it or not."—"I am glad you should go if you wish to go, Mr. Crewe," said Katharine; "but it is not a matter of much consequence to me."—"It's best, doubtless, to go about the world by oneself when one has secrets," said Crewe; "there's less chance of being found out." Katharine went to the hall door to look for the carriage. "It's not coming yet," said Crewe, planting himself in her way; "and there's no use in trying to get away, for you'll have me close beside you the whole way, so you may as well take matters quietly at once."—"Perhaps you would have the goodness to let me

pass, Mr. Crewe," said Katharine, as he stood in the doorway when she was about to re-enter the hall ; "I think my mistress wants me."—"Oh ! so you're not too proud to have a mistress," observed Crewe ; "I suppose that's since you've made up your mind to have a master." Katharine became very pale, though she tried not to appear to understand him, for she thought he had discovered her secret ; but it was only as yet his suspicion, and he went on, not knowing how really vulnerable she was, but from the mere love of tormenting her. "And you are going into Rilworth on important business, Miss Ashton ? I suppose you look down upon me too much to condescend to tell me what it is."—"I have several commissions," replied Katharine, endeavouring to speak gently and unconcernedly ; "one is to choose some new curtains for Mrs. Forbes's morning room."—"Oh ! yes, I forgot ; I quite forgot," said Crewe, sneeringly ; "Miss Ashton is such a very important personage at Maplestead, it is quite impossible even to choose a curtain without her permission. Would it be taking a great liberty to ask what the pattern is to be?"—"It is at the bottom of my bag," said Katharine ; "I am afraid I cannot take it out," and again she attempted to pass him, for he had been standing directly in her way all this time. "Not quite so fast," exclaimed Crewe ; "you ladies must spare a little of your curiosity to the gentlemen." He put his hand out as if he would have taken the bag from her. Katharine was very angry then, and holding the bag firmly in her hand, she said, "Mr. Crewe, if you do not understand your proper place, I shall be under the necessity of applying to your master." She turned round, and Colonel Forbes stood behind her. Crewe slunk back abashed. Katharine did not notice him farther, but address-

ing Colonel Forbes, said, "Perhaps, Sir, you will have the goodness to tell Mr. Crewe that the members of your household are to be treated with respect by him, as they are by yourself. I am sure it is what you wish." There was a spark of chivalrous feeling in Colonel Forbes's breast, easily excited when his selfishness did not come in the way, and Katharine's appeal to his protection roused it. "Quite right, Miss Ashton, I hope you will always keep your right position, and allow no liberties. Let me hear no more of this, Sir," he added, speaking haughtily and angrily to Crewe; "but remember that the next time will be the last." Crewe muttered something about a mistake, and only intending a joke, and disappeared into a side passage, whilst Katharine, as the carriage drove up, mounted to the back seat. She was rejoicing in the hope of having escaped from her troublesome companion, but no such fortunate circumstance was destined for her. Crewe kept out of sight till Colonel Forbes had seated himself, and then appeared from a side door, and with a sullen glance of triumph at Katharine, placed himself by her side.

That was the first stern rebuke which Crewe had received from his master. It rankled in his breast, and he vowed revenge. Not a word was spoken on either side during the drive, and when the carriage stopped at the Bear, Crewe was particularly attentive to Katharine, and helped her down, and even held the apple of discord—the bag—for her. He took care, however, to make her name every place to which she was going, and maliciously insinuated to Colonel Forbes in an under voice, that Miss Ashton was not always very punctual, so it might be well to make her be at the Bear by three instead of half-past, else she might keep him

waiting. Colonel Forbes never had had any experience of Katharine's want of punctuality, but through life he had gone upon the principle that it was better to make others wait for him than for him to wait for others; so he very naturally took the hint, and Katharine was curtailed of half an hour of her afternoon's holiday.

It was a keener disappointment than Crewe was aware of, though not keener than he would willingly have inflicted. Katharine did not recover it till she had completed her business, and found herself on her way to the Miss Ronaldsons'; then the feeling of freedom, and the hope of meeting Charles, made her put every disagreeable thought aside.

"Come in, my dear, come in, here's our nephew Charlie, and he'll be so glad to see you," was Miss Priscilla's welcome; and in its heartiness and ignorance it nearly overthrew Katharine's self-command, and she drew back with an unaccountable fit of shyness and amusement. "Don't be nervous, my dear; he's only an old friend, you know. Not but what I can quite understand,—I was shy myself when I was young. But he will like to hear all the news; he is quite as much interested about Rilworth people as ever." Miss Priscilla gave Katharine a gentle push, which assisted her resolution, and she went on. The two hasty strides which Charles took to meet her, and the sudden pause, were observed by Miss Ronaldson, from her great arm-chair, and attributed to their right cause, and commented upon in her own mind with the usual "Ah! poor fellow! if she had but said yes."—"You did not expect to meet our nephew here, did you, my dear?" said Miss Priscilla.—"I heard he would be in Rilworth," replied Katharine, honestly, "but I did not know that he would be here now." A smile passed over Charles Ronaldson's face, but

happily it was not observed by Miss Priscilla, whilst Miss Ronaldson was engaged in begging Katharine to sit down and take off her bonnet, and tell her all the news. "And so you are getting on pretty well at Maplestead, my dear, are you? and you don't find it very hard work?" Charles turned quickly from his aunt Priscilla, who was deep in the history of a proposed marriage which had just been broken off, in order to listen to the answer. Miss Priscilla drew herself up with a look of annoyance. "Well, Charlie, I must say there's little use in troubling oneself to tell you things, if you won't take the trouble to hear. Yet I should have thought you might have gained some good from other people's experience. You may be engaged yourself some of these days, and then you'll feel there may be 'many a slip 'twixt the cup and the lip.'"—"I feel that already every day, aunt Priscilla," said Charles, gravely.—"But there's no harm in hearing it again, Charlie. It's a thing young people are so very likely to forget; and then they pin their hope upon something which never comes to pass, and so they are miserable."—"But Charlie was never given much to hoping," said Miss Ronaldson. "Do you think he was, Katharine? You have known him from a boy."—"I should say he was more given to patience than hope," said Katharine, demurely.—"That is because you don't know me," replied Charles quickly. "My patience is much sooner exhausted than you may think for; it is nearly gone now." He said this with marked emphasis, and Katharine cast at him an imploring glance, which unfortunately was noticed by Miss Priscilla, who had been watching something that was going on in the street, but happened to turn round just at the moment. "Ah! it's very well to look at him," she said, rather angrily; "but if he won't

listen to his aunt, who nursed him when he was a baby, it's not to be supposed that looks from anybody else will do any good, or if they do they ought not. You were always an impatient baby, Charles, crying directly you hadn't everything you wanted; and I declare it seems to me that you are not much better now you are a man. If you would only have had patience just now, I would have told you something worth listening to."—"We will hear it after dinner, Aunt Priscilla," said Charles, laughing; "but Miss Ashton, I am sure, must be hungry after her drive. Let me put a seat for you," he added, addressing Katharine with an air of stiff politeness, which almost upset her gravity, whilst it caused Miss Ronaldson to murmur to herself: "Ah! so attentive as he always was! I do wonder she couldn't like him." The dinner came most opportunely to engage every one's attention. Charles carved, and talked, and made himself very agreeable, but he kept Katharine in a continual fright, from the impulse which always led him to listen to what she was saying, though he constantly checked himself, and tried to be doubly attentive to his aunts afterwards. It was a very doubtful kind of pleasure, and she was sure he felt it so, for every now and then her ear caught a suppressed sigh; and this made her uncomfortable and thoughtful. It certainly did seem hard upon him, after the many years of hopeless hope which he had passed, to be thus checked, and forced into constraint, at the very time when he might fairly have anticipated being at liberty to express all he felt. Such a state of things could scarcely go on; it was requiring too much of him; and it was worse now, as the time drew near when, but for her engagement at Maplestead, he might fairly have claimed the fulfilment of her promise to be his wife. These thoughts made

Katharine very silent at last, and then Charles noticed it, and looked anxiously at her, and became silent also, and Miss Priscilla wondered what had become of his cheerfulness all at once. "When you have a wife, Charlie, you won't be allowed to have these moods," she said, sharply; for she was always sharp when she alluded, in Katharine's presence, to the possibility of his marriage. "Wives don't let their husbands change with every change of the wind, do they, Katharine?"—"Miss Ashton is not a wife," said Charles, "so she cannot be expected to know."—"But she may be one of these days, my dear Charlie," said Miss Ronaldson: "there is nothing more likely, considering the quantity of fine company she must see at Maplestead." Katharine thought of Crewe, and smiled. "However that may be," said Miss Priscilla, "I'm quite sure that Katharine Ashton is not the person to bear dull faces and sighs; and what has come to you, Charles, all of a sudden, I can't for the life of me think? It is just like the wind going down."—"And the lull after it," said Charles, playfully, "which every one enjoys so much."—"Which no one enjoys, you mean," retorted Miss Priscilla; "at least I can answer for myself. Come, now, tell us more what you were saying about the Rilworth agency."—"It is a secret," said Charles, scarcely able to control the smile which curled his lips. "Oh! but Deborah is gone away," said Miss Ronaldson, "and Katharine Ashton is quite one of ourselves, she will never tell anything; she has been too well brought up not to know how to keep a secret." An assertion to which Katharine, when appealed to herself, replied, with a most composed countenance, "that she could assure Mr. Ronaldson that she had had great experience in the art of keeping secrets, and thought that she could even rival himself." Charles

still hesitated, apparently from real unwillingness to enter upon the topic, and Katharine sat in most painful suspense, increased tenfold when the servant re-entered, and put an end to all hope of hearing what was so important to her. A desultory conversation followed, principally about the news from Australia, which as far as it went had been tolerably satisfactory. They had heard once on the voyage. John wrote in good spirits, full of hope as usual. Selina only sent her love, for she was too ill to write. The children were becoming accustomed to the sea, and seemed to be very happy, notwithstanding the confinement; but they sent a particular love to Aunt Katharine. All this was very well; and since then a few lines had been received, written immediately on their landing, but not entering into any details of John's prospects. Katharine told all this, and talked about it, and was supposed by Miss Ronaldson to have her whole heart in the subject. But she did not quite deceive Miss Priscilla, who interrupted her, as from time to time she paused, not to take breath, but to recover the thread of the discourse, which in her abstraction she had lost, with, "Well! my dear, well! and what next? Charlie can't help you, can he? You look at him as if he could." Charlie could have helped her very well, for he had seen all the letters, and once or twice he was upon the point of correcting some little mis-statement, unintentionally made, till a glance from Katharine put him on his guard.

Nothing could be more disagreeable, and more contrary to the habits and feelings of both; and most rejoiced was Katharine when dinner was over, and she could adduce business with Mr. Reeves as an excuse for departure. Miss Ronaldson regretted that they had yet a great deal to say, and that Charlie had not told her half he had to tell about

the north, and what a comfortable house he had, and such a nice garden, and a good bit of land ; and how he had lately bought a little property near it ; and Miss Priscilla declared that they had not had time even to ask after Mrs. Forbes ; but Katharine was not to be prevailed upon to stay, and she departed with a kiss from the Miss Ronaldsons, and what looked like a civil shake of the hand from Charles.

CHAPTER LXVI.

"THIS is not to be endured, Katharine," exclaimed Charles, when he found himself alone with Katharine in the little inner study at Mr. Reeves's house, where they were free from all chance of interruption. "I don't think it is," was Katharine's calm reply. He brightened instantly. "You don't think so ; then you will give me some hope. — Oh ! Katharine, if you knew, if you could but for a moment imagine, how infinitely dear it would be ! But you cannot, you have not loved for eight years as I have." — "We will not compare notes upon that point," said Katharine, with a slight blush. "Perhaps I might be able to sympathise more than you would think proper ; but Charles, dearest, we must not be selfish, even for our own sakes. I am sure there is no evil so irremediable." — "I will not be selfish if I can help it," he replied eagerly ; "but is it possible not to be ? To have all one most longs for upon earth put just within one's grasp, and then withheld." — "By duty," said Katharine : "is not that the case with everything through life ?" — "But why should it be withheld ?" he continued ; "or for how long ? Is my happiness for ever to be made subservient to that of

another?" Katharine looked pained, and he instantly checked himself, and added, "Forgive me; I feel I am very wrong, but I have suffered so much—so very much—it has made me, I am afraid, impatient." Katharine laid her hand fondly upon his shoulder, and said, "I will not let you be impatient with me. I do not think this state of things can last: perhaps," and she smiled, "I do not think it ought to last; but it must be put an end to gradually."—"But this secrecy, this horrible secrecy," he exclaimed, vehemently; "not to be able to think, or look, or move naturally!"—"That certainly must be stopped," she said; "I feel myself that I cannot bear it. I doubt even if it would be right to continue it."—"Right or not right, it could not be possible," he continued, "if I come to Rilworth."—"To Rilworth! really, to take the agency do you mean?" Katharine's face became bright with happiness as she added, "that would indeed make a difference."—"The agency has been offered me at last," he replied: "I may remove hither in three months. Katharine, must my new home lack its chiefest treasure?" Katharine pressed her lips to his forehead, and in a low voice answered: "Not if it please God to open the way." His manner changed directly: he looked at her with fond reverence, and said, "My better angel, now as ever. Yes, we must wait for that."—"And wait cheerfully and unrepiningly, dearest; but I do hope our path will be more easy than we dared hope. If you are settled here or in this neighbourhood, it would not be going away from Maplestead in the same way as I had feared."—"And you will tell Mrs. Forbes at once?" he said eagerly. "Not at once; I would watch for a good time. She is so little able to bear any thing like a shock. Will not that satisfy you?" she added, looking anxiously at his

grave face. "It ought to satisfy me, I know," he said; "but, Katharine, I am not like you, I have no second interest to share my heart. Nay, do not interrupt me," seeing she was about to speak; "God forbid that I should be jealous; yet it must cross my mind occasionally,—that your thoughts are not all given to me."—"All that you would wish are. Indeed, indeed, they are, Charles," exclaimed Katharine, hastily.—"I know it—I believe it. It would be death to me not to believe it;—but, Katharine, my life is a continued straining after future happiness, and it makes me wretched."—"It could not have been otherwise, dearest Charles," said Katharine, "even if I had never gone to Maplestead."—"Yes, but there would have been no secrecy then; I might have seen you as often as I chose, and without any fear of unpleasant observation."—"The secrecy shall not last," said Katharine, firmly; "I will promise you that. But you must let me take my own time. It would be but a miserable thought for us both that, in order to save ourselves a short pain, we had been the cause of a lasting evil. Oh! Charles, do not let us begin life together with a feeling of self-reproach!"—He was silent for some minutes, and then, heaving a deep sigh, he said: "Katharine, I am not worthy of you; I could never be as unselfish as you are."—"You would feel as I feel, if you were in my place," said Katharine. "You know little or nothing of Mrs. Forbes, except by my report. If you were with her daily, watching and nursing her; if you could tell what it is to see her and talk with her, how it raises one's mind, and what a different feeling it gives one about life, and its pleasures, and business, you would understand what it is to think of giving her pain. For her sake I am a coward, Charles, even where you are concerned; but you will for-

give me. Our first thought was that our own love should not be the means of diminishing our love for others.”—“I must forgive you whatever you wish,” he replied. “You know too well how impossible it is for me ever to be angry with you:—but, Katharine, my patience will not bear again such an ordeal as I have gone through to-day.” Katharine smiled, and said: “You behaved very badly. If Miss Priscilla were not your aunt, the report of our engagement would have spread half over the town by this time. I am sure she suspected something. But indeed, Charles, for my own sake, I am anxious to have everything known as soon as possible. No one can tell the pain that anything approaching to deceit gives me. It was one of Miss Richardson’s strongest lessons; so it has grown up with me from my childhood.”—“Yet you could deceive me,” he replied, in a tone of playful reproach, “and for eight years too.”—“Because I deceived myself, or tried to do so,” said Katharine, laughing; “and we must not go back to those old grievances: I want to hear about the future now.”

A long conversation as to the Rilworth agency, and the plans which Charles had for removing from his home in the north, followed. There had often been a report before that the change would be made; but it had never come from good authority; now there could be little doubt, for Charles had himself received a letter upon the subject from the Duke of Lowther. His mother, he said, was rejoicing in the thought of returning to her own neighbourhood, and most especially happy in the hope that it would make some difference in Katharine’s determination. Three months only remained of the year which Katharine had always felt ought to elapse between her mother’s death and her mar-

riage. In that time she hoped to prepare Mrs. Forbes's mind for the idea of parting with her, and soften what might probably be her regret by the promise of settling near her. Charles, after all his uncertainty, received this fixed plan with unmitigated delight; but Katharine's feelings were less buoyant. She had begun her work at Maplestead; and even if called to leave it on the morrow, she would at least have the satisfaction of feeling that Jane had been made permanently happier by her influence; but much remained to be done, and, even if it were not so, there was something in looking forward three months to the probability of Jane's life, which made Katharine tremble. Death might be nearer even to herself, but with Jane it seemed ever actually present.

CHAPTER LXVII.

KATHARINE was at the Bear punctually by half-past three; so also was Crewe. Colonel Forbes had not arrived. Crewe lingered in the inn-yard, looking at carriages and criticising horses, and showing off airs to the stable-boys and ostlers. He did not take any notice of Katharine, and, finding it awkward to be standing about amongst the mixed set of men who crowded the doorway, waiting for the arrival of an omnibus from the railway, she thought it would be better to walk a little way down the street, still taking care not to be far enough away to give any cause for complaint. She had just parted from Charles, and tried not to think it possible that she should see him again; yet her restless eye wandered everywhere, not mistaking any one

else for him,—that would have been impossible,—but with an undefined hope that he would appear suddenly round some corner, and that she should see him even if he did not come near enough to speak to him. She did not think he would be seen very near the Bear, for they had had a half scolding and wholly affectionate quarrel ere they parted, because Katharine would not allow him to walk with her there; and he had threatened that, since she would not permit him to show her any attention in public, he should think it his duty to cut her if he saw her in the street. Ten minutes had gone by, and the omnibus had arrived and deposited its passengers, and the loiterers around the inn door had dispersed, and then Katharine thought it would be wise to return. Crewe met her at the entrance, and in his usual free way addressed her: "So, Miss Ashton, come at last! I hope you have had enough of parading the streets."—"Is Colonel Forbes ready, Mr. Crewe?" asked Katharine, not choosing to notice his manner.—"He might have been ready half an hour ago," said Crewe; "but it would have been no thanks to you."—"I should like to inquire if all the parcels are put into the carriage," said Katharine, and she moved on. Crewe placed himself by her side. "I should just like to hear what you have been doing with yourself all the morning," he said. His tone was so insolent that Katharine looked round for some to whom she could appeal, and just at that moment Charles Ronaldson crossed the entrance. Katharine's impulse was irresistible. She rushed back down the passage, followed by Crewe, and, touching Charles on the arm, exclaimed, "Stay with me, please, Mr. Ronaldson, stay." He turned round, frightened at her vehemence. Crewe stood still, looking at them with an air of cool impertinence. "Come this way with me, Katharine," said

Charles ; " this is not a place for you to wait in." He drew her aside into a little waiting room, and Crewe, bursting into a loud laugh, withdrew into the yard.

The carriage was ready. The parcels were examined and found to be right. Colonel Forbes was seated delivering some messages to Crewe, the most obsequious, smooth-mannered of his race. " Where is Miss Ashton?" asked Colonel Forbes impatiently. — " Not ready, sir, I believe," was the reply ; " she was here just now talking to the Duke's agent, Mr. Ronaldson, and they went in-doors together." Crewe knew his master well. This was precisely the very thing most likely to irritate him. The Rilworth household were expected always to behave so discreetly as never to excite even a passing observation. " Tell her I am waiting," said Colonel Forbes, in a dry haughty tone ; and in a moment Crewe was heard inquiring of every one he met where he could find Miss Ashton and Mr. Ronaldson. Colonel Forbes listened in an agony of annoyance. " Stay at Maplestead!" he thought to himself ; " no, that she should not ; if his fortune depended upon it. To be kept waiting by his wife's maid — to hear her name called out in that way in an inn ! it was atrocious. Ronaldson ! what business had he at Rilworth ? He would have nothing of that kind going on in his household. No dangling nonsense and folly. If Katharine Ashton did not know better how to conduct herself than that, the sooner she left Maplestead the better. It was a disgrace — a perfect disgrace." In a few moments he had become so indignant that he actually did believe he was himself disgraced by something which Katharine had done.

Crewe knocked at the door of the room in which he was told that Katharine was, and instantly after-

wards, throwing it open, announced that Miss Ashton must not keep the Colonel another minute, for he was quite tired of waiting. Katharine looked extremely vexed, but not in the least confused: Charles very much, as if he could have knocked Crewe down, had not an appealing glance from Katharine restrained him. He hesitated about following her; but she turned round to him, and said, in a quiet, self-possessed way, which perfectly bewildered Crewe: "Yes, come, I wish it;" and they went out together. Crewe followed with a lowering brow. Colonel Forbes leant forward in the carriage as she drew near, and, studiously avoiding Charles, but fixing his eyes upon her with a look which he meant to be annihilating, said, "You will be good enough another time, Miss Ashton, to remember punctuality."—"I am very sorry, sir," replied Katharine; but she ventured upon no excuse.—"Well, let me have no further waiting." He motioned to her to take her place in the back seat. Katharine turned to Charles, and said, in a voice which every one might hear, "Good-bye, Mr. Ronaldson, and thank you." There was a very cordial shake of the hand; Charles assisted Katharine to her seat, and the carriage drove off.

"Miss Ashton, I wish to speak with you in my study." Most alarming words to Katharine—most agreeable to Crewe! He was glad that he was not to be examined himself; he might have found it difficult to make out a case against Katharine; but she was certain, he thought, to inculcate herself. Colonel Forbes was just in that state of mind which magnifies the least offence into a crime. Crewe had remarked quite enough to convince him that Katharine's feeling for Charles Ronaldson went beyond that of ordinary friendship; and, whether engaged to him or not, Colonel Forbes was equally

likely to be displeased. He never realised the fact, that persons out of his own sphere in life ever really fell in love, or indeed had any right to do so; like pheasant and partridge shooting, it seemed a privilege peculiarly reserved for the fortunate individuals "who live at home at ease," and have nothing else to occupy them. And as to any member of his own household having a feeling approaching to attachment—much more venturing to form an engagement—without his full consent, it was little less than high treason.

Crewe's opinion was well founded—at least to a certain extent. Colonel Forbes felt himself an injured man; and, as most injured men would have done in his place, had in his own mind tried, condemned, and sentenced the culprit many times during that short drive from Rilworth to Maplestead. But there was something in Katharine's quiet dignity, when she appeared before him, which baffled all his intentions of awing her at once into the confession of her fault. It was as perplexing as the cordial "good-bye, and thank you," which remained in his memory in spite of his prejudices, and suggested that it was impossible for one so open and simple to have offended in any degree against the laws of good taste and right feeling.

Still he was not a man to yield to weak impressions from mere manner, and he placed himself in his arm-chair, in an attitude at once commanding and easy—a happy mixture of the magisterial and the gentleman-like; and, motioning to Katharine to be seated also, said: "I have sent for you, Miss Ashton, at once, because I feel that it is better in all cases to have no delay in matters concerning the regulation of my household. In Mrs. Forbes' state of health, many things which would of themselves fall naturally under the notice of the mistress

of the family are forced upon mine. I am unfortunately compelled to be cognisant of them, and I must, therefore, of necessity remark upon them. A very painful duty this is in some cases, especially where reproof is involved; reproof,"—and he looked at her sternly, "of those who, having great trust reposed in them, are peculiarly called upon to set an example of propriety of behaviour. I have been grieved to-day, Miss Ashton—deeply grieved; I do not wish to enter into details; your own conscience will sufficiently suggest the cause I have for addressing you in this manner; but I wish to put you on your guard. Mrs. Forbes is much attached to you, and I do not pretend to deny that she has great reason to be so. You have shown yourself most devoted to her service; but no amount of consideration for you will render either her or myself insensible to the duties incumbent upon us as being at the head of a large household. It is our first duty to see that decorum is observed in it; and if those who are dependent upon us choose to transgress the laws of decorum, there is but one alternative—they must leave us. I do not mean," he added, observing Katharine change colour, "that your conduct has yet been such as to bring us to this distressing decision; I wish only to warn you, that you may be on your guard for the future. In the mean time I should wish to make some inquiries, to which I trust you will not object to give a straightforward answer. May I ask how long you have been acquainted with Mr. Ronaldson?"

"From childhood, sir, and we are engaged to be married."

Poor Colonel Forbes! What a downfall! After that long speech, that well-turned, dignified, almost paternal address, which he had studied, as he was accustomed to study his speeches in parliament, to

find that there was nothing more to be said! No wonder that he had no sympathy for Katharine's weakness—no pity for the blood which crimsoned her cheek till the tears stood in her eyes, or the tremulous voice which, although each word was uttered quite clearly, seemed as if it came from the depths of her heart, so low and changed was its tone. He went on mercilessly: "Engaged! Very strange! most strange! very unfitting! without any person's knowledge!"—"Mr. and Mrs. Reeves have known it from the beginning, sir," said Katharine, venturing to interrupt him.—"From the beginning? what beginning? I wish to have no beginnings in my house. Very unpardonable conduct, indeed! The last thing I should have expected. May I inquire how long this engagement of which you speak has lasted?"—"About three-quarters of a year, sir. Mr. Ronaldson and myself were engaged before I entered Mrs. Forbes' service."—"Then you came under false pretences," exclaimed Colonel Forbes, his eyes flashing; "or did Mrs. Forbes know this? Has she encouraged it?"—"Mrs. Forbes knows nothing, sir," said Katharine, beginning to feel more frightened than she had anticipated, since she had imagined that when the truth was known no one could find fault with her. "It was on her account that I persuaded Mr. Ronaldson to allow of our engagement being a secret. I feared that if Mrs. Forbes knew it, she would not like me to bind myself to attend upon her."—"What? I don't understand you." Colonel Forbes was quite right; he did not at all understand. Accustomed to look through his narrow worldly telescope, he could not at once reach the sphere of higher motives by which persons like Katharine were actuated.—"I have often wished lately, sir," continued Katharine, her voice becoming more

steady and her manner calmer, "that Mrs. Forbes did know of my engagement; in fact, it was only this very day Mr. Ronaldson and myself agreed that it ought not any longer to be kept from her." — "It was a pity that you had not thought so long before," said Colonel Forbes, interrupting her hastily; but Katharine went on as composedly as ever. — "When I offered to be Mrs. Forbes's maid, sir, she was much too ill to bear anything like a shock, or indeed even ordinary excitement. I had then but one thought on my mind—to wait upon her, and nurse her; to repay, if I could, some small portion of the infinite obligation I am under for years of kindness." She paused, but, finding that Colonel Forbes did not reply, she continued: — "My wish was granted, sir, and I thank you for it, from the very bottom of my heart I thank you. Whatever change of plan your knowledge of my position may make, I can have but one feeling of deep gratitude, first, to God for having given me the thought, and next to you, for having been the means of enabling me to fulfil a service, the remembrance of which will be a blessing to the latest hour of my existence. As regards my conduct to-day," she added, "it was not, I confess, strictly according to established rules; but perhaps Mr. Crewe will, if asked, acknowledge that it was his insolence which made me hastily seek protection from the only person in the world of whom I have a right to claim it."

Katharine was silent. Colonel Forbes raised his head, which, while she had been speaking, he had leant upon his hand. He looked grave and unusually pale. "And how long was this agreement with Mrs. Forbes to last?" he asked in a softened tone. — "We could not say, sir; it depended upon circumstances?" — "Upon Mrs. Forbes?" — "Partly,

sir ; I could not leave her if she were very ill. But Mr. Ronaldson has been offered the Rilworth agency, and that would make a great difference, because I still should be in the neighbourhood, and able to attend upon Mrs. Forbes, if she wished it, at any moment.”—“ And Mr. Ronaldson consented to your undertaking this service ; binding yourself in this way in spite of your engagement ? ” said Colonel Forbes.—“ My promise to Mrs. Forbes, sir, was given before my engagement was formed. Mr. Ronaldson would have been the last person to wish me to break it.”—“ And he did not object ? he did not think that you were lowering yourself ? ”—“ Mr. Ronaldson, sir, thinks as I do, that we can never lower ourselves by performing the duties which God is pleased to set before us.” Again Colonel Forbes’s face was hidden as he leant down with his forehead resting on his hand. There was a silence of some seconds ; then he said, scarcely looking up as he spoke, “ Miss Ashton, your explanation is perfectly satisfactory.” And Katharine rose to retire. “ Will you allow me, sir, to ask that Mrs. Forbes may not be told without my knowledge.”—“ Certainly, you may depend upon it ; ” and Katharine closed the door, and Colonel Forbes leant back in his chair, to think.

To think ! had he ever more cause to think ? for what a new light had broken in upon him ! Disinterestedness, unselfishness, self-denial, — he had heard of these things before ; he fancied that he understood them ; but they were not the same virtues when practised in his own circle of friends as when seen in the conduct of Katharine Ashton. He could almost have said it was a wild enthusiasm — a romantic attachment — that Katharine loved Jane more than she did Charles, and therefore had been consulting her own pleasure in sacrificing one

to the other. But Charles Ronaldson had consented likewise; he had put aside pride and personal feelings, and consented, as it seemed willingly, that Katharine should separate herself from him, lower herself in the eyes of many, subject herself to the restraints of domestic service,—for what? Was it folly, or coldness? or was it that which Colonel Forbes had often described, but never practised — Christian unselfishness? He thought — it was great pain, but something within seemed to compel him to dwell upon it — of what he would have done for Jane,— what he had done. He remembered how he had thwarted, fretted, contradicted, blamed her, in all cases consulted his own will. How, when her health was in jeopardy, he had urged her to exertions beyond her strength; how, even when he had tried to please her, it was never at his own expense. Katharine Ashton in a lower rank of life, with no claim except that of early acquaintance and affection, could sacrifice time and freedom, and the feelings of all others the dearest to human nature, and not even put herself in the way of receiving gratitude in return—and he had given up nothing; he knew not, except by name, the meaning of self-denial. He had lived for himself; his best actions, his highest virtues in the sight of men, were but the tinsel fruits of a mean and miserable calculation for his own aggrandisement. God had bestowed upon him fortune, intellect, influence, blessed him in his domestic relations, given him a wife, whose only defect seemed to be her power of self-sacrifice for him, and children, whose simple innocence might day by day have been a lesson of the purity and beauty of Heaven. His life had been one unbroken series of successes in whatever he attempted; and now, when he looked back upon the

road he had travelled, in what position did he find himself—nearer to or farther from his Maker?

Conscience gave a mournful answer. There had been a time,—how well he remembered it! for it was the one green and freshened spot in the dreary wilderness of a life passed in the service of self—when he had known the rejoicing thrill of hallowed enthusiasm, the strong energy of devoted purpose, the free lightness of heart, of a spirit which has given itself with intensity of will to the service of its Creator. That time had been when he first knew Jane, when he caught the inspiration of her heavenly love, and shared in the purity and gladness of her exalted hopes. But it had passed; the very love which first raised his heart to God afterwards became his snare. The selfishness which he had nurtured in his breast from childhood re-entered his earthly paradise in the guise of an angel of light, and the affections which should have guided him on his way to Heaven led him down to the darkness of earth. He could trace the gradual decay now by the light shed upon his conscience—by the sight of pure unselfishness. He could see how, by degrees, he had fallen short, suffering his love to be an excuse for the neglect of small duties, whilst still retaining the tastes which charmed him from their elevation and refinement; and then endeavouring to tempt Jane to like neglect; and when he found he could not succeed, throwing himself again into the spirit of her holier feelings; not because he loved them, but because they were pleasing to her. And so began that fatal deception which led him to place himself at her feet, and listen to all she said, as to “the very lovely song of one that hath a pleasant voice, and can play well on an instrument, whilst he heard her words, but did them not.” At that

time he had no fear of being led to neglect any duties. He thought that he had a guardian angel always at hand; he loved her so dearly, and made himself so entirely one with her, that he imagined, when he entirely approved of her charity and self-denial, that he was charitable and self-denying himself. He could not believe this now, for the first delirium of affection had long vanished; his wife had sunk to the level of mortality, their interests had in many instances been separated, his enthusiasm was gone, but the selfishness which he had fostered under its shadow remained to be his curse and his reproach. And yet on Colonel Forbes's table there were lying at that moment letters from men of talent and high principle, acknowledging his unflinching integrity, and complimenting him upon his sound judgment; letters from bishops, and rectors, and curates, appealing to him as the patron of all that was good and religious in the land; petitions from the poor and the oppressed, entreating his aid, as the person the most able and certainly the most willing to aid them in their difficulties. Could they all be deceived? Colonel Forbes did not answer the question in words, but in feeling,—a feeling of humiliation, bitter, intense. But how long would it endure?

CHAPTER LXVIII.

A MONTH afterwards and Katharine was again summoned to Colonel Forbes's study—not by Crewe. There had been a strange alteration in the Maplestead household. Crewe was gone. Mrs. Brown said she knew why, and hinted that he had reasons

for being Miss Ashton's enemy for life ; but Katharine merely remarked that she was surprised a man of his character could so long have deceived Colonel Forbes, and then changed the conversation. The new man was remarkably civil to the lady's-maid ; perhaps he took his tone from that of others ; perhaps he had been warned that female influence was at that time paramount at Maplestead. Certainly Colonel Forbes's manner to Katharine must have had some influence in teaching his servants the light in which he himself regarded her. He did not intend to make it different from what it had been ; but respect shows itself unconsciously, and as Colonel Forbes's respect had deepened, so also had his attention increased. Not that he felt quite comfortable in Katharine's presence : she was still a problem to him. He could have understood her a great deal better if she had been born in his own station, and mixed in his own society. He was a man full of prejudices, which he had never taken the trouble to combat ; narrow minded, because he had never looked upon human life except in a worldly point of view. The large circle of the Christian Church, embracing within itself all orders and all ranks, and giving to each class, and each individual in that class, a work without which the happiness of the whole could not be complete, was as unreal to him as the myths of ancient historical records. It might be true, or it might not ; but it was nothing to him. He lived for a select, exclusive circle ; he believed that others did the same. The power which should unite them all in one was unknown to him.

Yet Katharine was a lady ; he felt that, and it was his great difficulty. She was a lady, because she had the true spirit of a lady. She did what every one who wishes to be so thoroughly must do. She kept precisely in the position in which the pro-

vidence of God had placed her. She was perfectly unpretending, simple in dress, gentle and unpretending in manner; her taste and tact were those of the most refined education. When he contrasted her with his wife, he could see that Jane had more outward polish, that she was more graceful, more accomplished, and better informed, that her accent was softer; but the difference went no further. He had seen hundreds of women moving in the fashionable circles of society obtrusive, flirting, noisy, or even, with great apparent elegance, civilly impertinent and contemptuous, who could not have been named in the same breath with Katharine Ashton for real refinement. What was the cause of her superiority? Nature might have done something, but it could not have done all. She had had few advantages of education; none of society, beyond the little she might have met at the house of Mr. Reeves. She had always moved in what might be called her own set, except of late, when she might be said to have left it for one which was lower; but she was a lady in the true sense of the word still. And why? It was nothing outward. Colonel Forbes felt strongly that the very instant any one should attempt to move her out of her natural place, and make her assume the manners and habits of those above her, that moment the charm would be gone. Katharine Ashton dignified her position; her position did not dignify her: that was the essential distinction. She dignified it by taking it from the Hand of God, and using it as the means of promoting His glory. If she had once attempted to divert it to her own service, her power would have been over.

Jane did not yet know of Katharine's engagement: it was Katharine's particular request that she should not be told till Charles Ronaldson's removal to

Rilworth should be a matter of such absolute certainty — humanly speaking — as not to admit of a doubt. This morning, however, the letter conveying the intelligence that the change was finally decided upon had arrived, and Katharine was wishing to see Colonel Forbes upon the subject at the very moment he sent for her.

“Pray sit down, Miss Ashton.” There was marked courtesy in Colonel Forbes’s manner now, and even more than that—gentleness and interest. “I sent to ask your opinion about a little plan I have in my mind for Mrs. Forbes. I wanted to know if you thought she would be equal to it. The Duchess of Lowther has begged us to go to Rilworth Castle for a few days: she thinks the change may be good. What do you say?” Katharine was taken very much by surprise. Jane had not left home now for some months. “It would not be a long journey,” continued Colonel Forbes; “and she might be as quiet as she liked when she was once there.”—“But, I suppose, there would be a good many persons in the house, sir,” said Katharine.—“Probably; but they would not come in the way. She might breakfast and dine alone; in fact, live quite by herself if she wished it. I think it might be a good thing for her; but of course I would not urge it.” He said this in an apologetic tone. Some inward feeling always made him anxious now to excuse himself to Katharine whenever he did or said anything tending to selfishness. “If she could be quite quiet,” began Katharine doubtfully.—“Oh! you might be assured of that. I should take every precaution myself, and indeed I should insist upon it that it was so. I think she would like it.”—“It might be an amusement to her,” observed Katharine, “and it would be change of air.”—“Yes, and Dr. Lowe recommends both, if they

could be had without fatigue. But still I would not urge it, and give up the idea for myself.”—“I would take every care of Mrs. Forbes, sir,” said Katharine, “if you were obliged to leave her.”—“I should not leave her,” was the rather short reply. Katharine felt a little thrown back, afraid that perhaps she had jarred upon him by some unintentional forwardness of tone or manner, so she merely observed that Mrs. Forbes had seemed stronger the last few weeks. He paused again, and then said with some abruptness, “Dr. Lowe rests a great deal upon her gaining strength?”—“Yes.” But there was no assent to Colonel Forbes’ meaning, though there was to his actual words. He caught the accent of doubt and said: “You don’t think she is gaining strength?”—“I can’t say, sir; she has seemed able to do more the last few days,” said Katharine. Colonel Forbes sighed deeply. “It is her appetite which seems to fail most now,” continued Katharine.—“Change might be good for that,” he remarked; but there was very little hope or energy in his tone. “I should think it might be, sir,” was Katharine’s cautious answer.—“And you would go with us, Miss Ashton?” The question was so strange that Katharine was quite confused in replying to it. “I could not take her without you,” continued Colonel Forbes.—“Certainly not, sir,—of course,—I never thought it possible,” replied Katharine; “that is, as long—if I am permitted to remain with her.”—“Yes, as long,” repeated Colonel Forbes, thoughtfully. “May I be allowed to ask you a question? When do you think your engagement must terminate?”—“I was wishing to speak to you upon the subject, sir,” said Katharine, blushing. “I have heard——” “And so have I,” said Colonel Forbes quickly, “Mr. Ronaldson is to come to Rilworth immediately; it was that which

made me anxious to know your plans.”—“There are none formed yet, sir,” replied Katharine; “but I suppose Mr. Ronaldson would not like, would wish——” “To have them soon settled,” said Colonel Forbes, gravely, but good-naturedly; “very natural. Do you think the time would be as much as two months?”—“I should like to consult Mrs. Forbes’ wishes as much as possible, sir,” said Katharine. “I could not be happy in leaving her without some one who would really look after her.”—“Then it might be as well to let her know soon,” said Colonel Forbes; “there would be more time then to inquire for some one to supply your place; as far, that is, as it can be supplied. I think you said you would like to make the communication yourself?”—“If you have no objection, sir.”—“And it should be done without delay,” said Colonel Forbes; “otherwise, if she should distress herself much, it might interfere with my proposed plan of taking her to Rilworth Castle.” There was a good deal of the old feeling about this. He was very anxious for the visit, and disliked the idea of anything which might interfere with it. “I would tell Mrs. Forbes to-day, sir,” said Katharine, “if you thought it right.”—“I think she will not care much now that I can be with her at any moment if she should want me.”—“You must not go far away, Miss Ashton,” said Colonel Forbes, with a smile which was kind, though his manner was stiff—“Mr. Ronaldson has an idea of taking the Duke of Lowther’s small farm of West-bank, sir,” said Katharine; that would be only a quarter of a mile from the lower lodge.”—“Oh! a very good arrangement. I trust it may answer.” Colonel Forbes thought a moment, and added, “Mr. Ronaldson, I conclude, would not like so large a farm as Moorlands, as his time will be so occupied elsewhere? It may be vacant again soon.” Katha-

rine's heart was very full with many mixed feelings. She had great difficulty in expressing them; yet gratitude was uppermost. She felt as if Colonel Forbes must have conquered much of undefined antipathy to herself, and old annoying recollections of her brother, to make this proposal. "You are very, very kind, sir," she began; "indeed, you are very kind; and Mr. Ronaldson would be most grateful for the offer; but I could not say for him."—"Only would you like it?" inquired Colonel Forbes.—"I don't quite know, sir." Her eyes were dimmed with tears. "I think it would be happy in some ways; not in all;—perhaps," and she smiled; "a new life had better begin in a new place." Colonel Forbes felt a little damped. He had not yet learnt to throw himself into the minds of others so as to judge correctly of their feelings. He became rather more stiff, and renewed the subject of the visit to Rilworth Castle. They would stay a week, he said; it would not be worth while to go for a shorter time. He should wish Katharine to say nothing on the subject until after she had made her own communication. Katharine merely replied that she would certainly take an opportunity of talking to Mrs. Forbes in the course of the day, and then, with her usual curtsey, retired.

Colonel Forbes felt very uncomfortable when she was gone; he knew he had been so cold, but he could not forget his old manner. He was angry with himself, however, now;—in former days he would have been angry with Katharine. It was very hard up-hill work, at his age, to unlearn the lessons which he had been taught from his infancy.—Nature, or rather habit, that second nature, would often have its way.—Yet he was, in a measure, improving; if he was not yet unselfish from Chris-

tian principles, he at least seldom or never acted selfishly without having a feeling of self-reproach.

Katharine went up to Jane and found her with the children, looking particularly happy, if not particularly well. Yet there had been, upon the whole, a marked change for the better, within the last few months. Katharine could not help now and then hoping that, after all, her affection might have exaggerated the weakness of Jane's constitution; and that, now that her mind was quieter, her physical frame would recover its strength, and the threatened evil be averted at least for years. "Mamma says we shall be going to London again, soon," said Lucy, running up to Katharine, as she entered the room, "and that you will go with us."—"We hope so," said Jane, gently;—"we should not like to go anywhere without Miss Ashton, Lucy, should we?"—"And then we will take you about to see all the sights," said Philip:—"but a long time ago, we wanted you to go to London, and Papa did not like it."—"Hush! Philip," said Lucy; "you should not say that."—"But it is true," retorted Philip. "I remember it quite well. It was one day we were playing in the long walk, together; and then,—I forget exactly what—only I remember afterwards, Papa told me he did not want Miss Ashton to go to London."—"Papa did not know Miss Ashton as well then as he does now," said Jane; "that makes all the difference. But you must go to Mademoiselle, now, my darlings, for Miss Ashton and I have something to say to each other." The two children ran up, as usual, to their Mamma, to be kissed; and Philip, as he was leaving the room, came back again, and insisted upon putting his arm round Katharine's neck, and whispering, as a great secret,

that he loved her dearly, and he should not at all like to go to London without her.

The expression of Katharine's face struck Jane as sorrowful, — and when Philip was gone, she said to her, affectionately : — “ You are not vexed, dear Katharine, at any nonsense the children have talked?—Times are very much altered, as you know, since then.” — “ Yes, indeed, they are,” replied Katharine — “ I was not thinking of that, I assure you, Ma'am. — Might I ring for your luncheon, if you are inclined for it?” — “ It is not luncheon time yet,” said Jane, looking at her watch. — “ Please give me my work, and sit down for a few minutes, unless you are very busy.” — “ I could not be busy, if you want me, Ma'am,” said Katharine, “ and I had something to say to you, if it would not worry you to listen.” — “ Not very much,” said Jane, with a playful smile. — “ And I am not in a humour to be worried to-day. Oh ! Katharine, it is such a blessing to feel something more in health, both in mind and body ;” and as Katharine brought her work, she made her sit down on a low chair by the sofa, and added : — “ Now make me your confessor, and tell me what is in your mind.” Katharine hesitated. “ Shall I help you?” continued Jane, in the same light tone ; — but, seeing that Katharine looked pale and nervous, her voice changed, and she said, — “ There is not anything really the matter, dear Katharine ? ” — “ Nothing of consequence — in the house, or about the servants,” replied Katharine, knowing that Jane's thoughts would naturally turn in that direction ; “ and nothing really the matter, at all,” she added, observing that Jane still looked suspicious of evil : — “ but I am afraid, — it has come into my mind, that perhaps I may not be able to go to London with you.” — “ Because of that

foolish speech, that nonsense of the children," exclaimed Jane. — "Oh, Katharine, how could you for an instant remember it?" — "Not for that!" replied Katharine, eagerly; "Oh no, indeed: — but I think there may be difficulties." Jane gazed at her with a look of alarm. "Dear Mrs. Forbes, — forgive me, — I am engaged to be married to Mr. Ronaldson;" and Katharine's composure quite gave way, and her tears fell very fast. She did not see the expression of Jane's face, for she had covered her own with both her hands. Perhaps it was well she did not. It might have given her a pang which she could not have forgotten. She only felt the warm kiss imprinted on her forehead, and heard the sweet, though now low and trembling voice, which whispered: — "Thank God! dear Katharine, for your sake!" — Katharine could not look up, — but she went on speaking rapidly. — "He is coming to Rilworth to live, and he does not like any delay. Dear Mrs. Forbes, I must leave you." Poor Katharine! her tears became almost sobs, the confession was much worse than she expected. She had been very abrupt! She was not saying at all what she had intended, and at the moment of speaking she felt that she was doing harm. But she had miscalculated Jane's strength; at least, for that instant. She was exceedingly quiet, — soothing in voice and manner as she might have been to a child, — and fondly she placed her hand on Katharine's head, and again and again kissed her forehead, forgetting all worldly distance and distinction, — every thing but the deep love which had grown with their growth, and strengthened with their strength. "And you do not think me unkind and selfish?" began Katharine; "you do not think I could leave you if you were not stronger?" — "I do

not think you could do anything but what is most good and considerate for every body," said Jane, interrupting her. "God forbid that I should give you cause to grieve for having come to me, because I was selfish in parting from you. Oh! Katharine, I could not be so ungrateful for that which has been the greatest blessing of my life." Katharine looked up with a smile brightening her face. Jane's eye rested on a small and most beautifully bound Bible which lay on her work-table. It had been Colonel Forbes' present to her that morning, because he said that it tired her to hold a larger book; and there were rare flowers on the table which she had especially longed to see; and beside her lay a little pencil note which he had sent her from his study, fixing the hour at which he would drive with her to see some poor person about whom she was anxious. She made no comment, however, upon these things, but merely said, "All has been different, dear Katharine, since you came."—"And there will be no real change when I am gone," replied Katharine, reading her thoughts. Jane put her hand to her eye to wipe away a tear, yet she smiled instantly afterwards, and said: "I must not complain if my nurse is still near; and you will remain at Rilworth, you say?"—"Almost at Maplestead," replied Katharine, "Mr. Ronaldson talks of taking the Duke of Lowther's farm at Westbank." Jane was silent, but the muscles of her throat moved convulsively. She laid down her work, and stood up. "I am going to my room, dear Katharine," she said, "don't let any one come to me if you can help it." She stooped, as if intending to kiss Katharine again, but it seemed as if she could not trust herself, and slowly she left the room; and Katharine listened to her light step

crossing the gallery, and heard her enter her chamber and bolt the door.

She did not appear for another hour.—Then she was very pale but quite cheerful, and went out for her drive with Colonel Forbes, and dined with him as usual ; but whenever Katharine was in the room, Jane's eyes lingered upon her with that gaze of yearning tenderness which is the language of those to whom God has denied the power of venting their feelings in words.

CHAPTER LXIX.

RILWORTH Castle ! It was a place of which Katharine had heard from infancy, which she had seen occasionally in the distance, and now and then had heard described ; but this was all she knew about it, though it was only seven miles from the town. It was not a show place, so there had been no excuse for making excursions to see it. The Duke of Lowther happened to be very fond of it, and spent a larger portion of his time there than at his splendid seat in the north ; but there was really nothing in it very remarkable. Castle, in fact, it was not. Tradition said there had been such a place once, and a piece of an old wall in the park was pointed out as having formed part of the original building ; but Rilworth Castle now was a substantial, gothic house, built round a quadrangle, with an attempt at cloisters on three sides, a little turret at the north-east angle, and a tolerably handsome gateway at the entrance, surmounted by the ducal arms. The house certainly was not striking in beauty, yet Rilworth Castle was a place which, on the whole, had great charms. It stood

high, and there was exceeding beauty in the glimpses of richly-wooded country, and far blue distance, seen at the extremity of the broad walks shaded by splendid trees, by which the grounds immediately adjoining the house were intersected; and there was a flower garden on one side, quaint, and formal, and brilliant with all the hues of the rainbow, such as the most fastidious of gardeners might have envied; and a very pretty little village, with ornamented cottages, close at hand, to give occupation to any one who might desire it; and, above all, a most perfect and picturesque old church, properly cared for, and within a convenient distance of the house. Very pleasant objects to look at. And Rilworth Castle was a very pleasant house to stay at. Hunting and shooting, politics and theology, poetry and art, music and dancing, gossip and embroidery; there was something to suit every taste. And the Duke was very good, though a little prosy, and the Duchess extremely kind and hospitable; and the grown-up sons and daughters, who congregated around them, were, for the most part, clever and amiable; so that, without any exception, it was the most popular house in the country. But it was not particularly agreeable, but only particularly odd to Katharine, to find herself on the road to Rilworth Castle: it produced a wonderful confusion in her memory. Barnes—Colonel Forbes's new man—a very discreet and respectful person, could scarcely extract a word from her during the journey. She could think of nothing but that old, long past away absurdity, the Union Ball at the Bear, and the poor Duchess's discomfiture, and Lady Marchmont's graceful dancing, and Colonel Forbes' wasted energies, and George Andrews' pretension, and Selina, and Martha Dobson, and her own dear father and mother, and that strange, quiet, shy, thoughtful individual, whom

now——Yes, life was indeed stranger than romance. To look back upon it, and read it, and understand it, how very wonderful, yet how infinitely merciful was the arrangement of its every detail! The carriage entered the park, and Barnes pointed out the best view, and was proud to do the honours, for he had once lived in the Duke of Lowther's service. But he could only gain a quiet assent of admiration from Katharine, whose chief thought, as they drew near the house, was how she should undergo the ordeal of meeting the innumerable ladies' maids whose acquaintance doubtless she would have to make. Mrs. Brown had warned her that the Castle was always full, even when the Duchess professed to have no one there; and urged her to make herself smart, as it would be expected of her. But Katharine's black dress saved her from any such painful necessity; and, what was still better, she had a private assurance from Jane, that, beyond the necessity of joining the regular housekeeper's party at meal times, she would be at liberty to remain by herself as much as she chose. Forgetfulness of self, however, was her great assistance now, as it had been many times before in her life. As soon as the carriage stopped, she might have been in the presence of royalty, and she would have been unembarrassed, for all her thought was for Jane; all her anxiety, to know whether she felt over fatigued by the long drive; and when the inquiry was answered by a bright smile, and a "thank you! I really think I am refreshed," her heart bounded so lightly, that the appearance of all the ladies' maids at the same moment, begging for an introduction, would have failed to disturb her equanimity. "This way, Miss, if you please," said one of the men-servants, who was assisting in carrying the luggage up the stairs; and Katharine was ushered through innumerable

passages, and made to mount broad stairs and narrow ones, and turn to north, south, east, and west, till all her dawning notions of the topography of the house were utterly confounded ; and at last she was left in a huge apartment, much larger than Jane's at Maplestead, with the information that Mrs. Forbes's boudoir was within, and the maid's beyond.

Katharine thought it all very grand, and comfortable, though there was ample furniture in the room, and a large blazing fire. It took her so long to walk from one end of the apartment to the other, that she felt as if half her days would be wasted in wandering from the wardrobe to the bureau, and from the bureau to the wardrobe. And when she began the business of unpacking, every thing seemed to have a knack of putting itself in the wrong place, and nothing was to be found that was wanted. She began to be quite alarmed at last, for the dressing bell rang, and Jane she was sure would appear to be dressed for dinner, long before any thing could be ready for her. After all, it was doubtful whether she really was fitted for the office of lady's maid. But Jane came up stairs, tired, and not inclined to go down till the evening, and then Katharine was in her element again ; and when she had made the little boudoir exactly what she thought Jane would like, and established her there upon the sofa, with a cup of coffee, which was the only thing she fancied, every thing seemed quite natural and home-like ; most especially when Jane looked up at her with her bewitching smile of gratitude, and said, " Ah ! Katharine, Rilworth Castle was never so pleasant to me before."

It was not at all home-like, however, to be summoned down stairs to tea. Such an array of ladies' maids ; such silk gowns, and ribbons, and brooches !

and such etiquettes and proprieties! If anything could have discomposed her, the ceremonies of the house-keeper's room unquestionably would; but Katharine was not in a mood to be affected by them, and only smiled to herself as she thought how she should amuse Charles by describing them. .

Jane was amused, too, when Katharine went up stairs to her again, and gave an account of her entertainment. It was a new life to her, for she had never liked to talk to her former attendant upon such subjects, though Laurette would have gossiped interminably if permitted. She was rather anxious, though, for Katharine's comfort, and afraid that her good taste and refinement of feeling might be offended by the absurd display and pretension, which could scarcely be avoided where there was such a mixture of society.—But Katharine put all fears to flight by her quiet remark: "You know, ma'am, we can't always expect to meet people who understand how to keep their station; but it does not signify as long as we keep our own." Jane had often felt that in her own circle, for human nature is the same everywhere, and vulgarity, like true politeness, is confined to no rank.

And that first evening at Rilworth Castle was passed by Katharine as quietly as it would have been at Maplestead. Mrs. Forbes went to the drawing-room, and she sat in her own chamber, writing to Charles. She had little curiosity as to anything that was going on in the house, except that she thought it would be pleasant, if there should happen to be any dancing, to watch Lady Marchmont, and see whether the years which had passed over her head, since the Union Ball, had in any way diminished her grace and beauty. But there were only distant sounds of some very sweet singing, and the notes of a harp. About ten

o'clock, Jane came up stairs, to go to bed. She was looking weary, and said that the evening had been dull rather than otherwise, for the gentlemen would get together and talk politics, and the ladies were rather stiff. The next day, however, there were to be more arrivals, some very agreeable people; and there was an idea of making a large riding party, and going to see the ruins of a large abbey about twelve miles off. A cousin of Lady Marchmont, who was staying in the house, had never been there; and it was thought, that it might be a pleasant expedition.

"They have been trying to persuade Colonel Forbes to go," she added with a happy smile, as she sat down by the fire, and Katharine began to unfasten the pearl spray in her hair; "but he seemed inclined to say, 'no.' The Duchess told me she was sure he was afraid I should fall into some mischief if he left me, and I do think he is very anxious about my being kept quiet."—"Colonel Forbes made so many promises that you should be quiet, Ma'am," said Katharine, "he is bound to keep his word."—"From fear of your grave looks also, Katharine," replied Jane; "I am sure he stands in considerable awe of you." She spoke playfully; but a sigh followed, and she added gravely, "I am not sure that I do not feel some awe of you myself now. You are not quite what you were." Katharine smiled, and said she did not feel like what she was, herself; it was all very strange, she could not understand it. Jane became very thoughtful. "You must explain it more to me to-morrow," she said, "some things perplex me since I have been thinking it all over; and Colonel Forbes says—" she paused as if she had a difficulty in expressing herself, and then added in a tone of affectionate reproach.—"Katharine, I thought you would have told me every-

thing.”—“I would if I might, Ma’am,” replied Katharine, simply; “and I will if I may to-morrow. I think to-night you ought to go to bed.”

“Colonel Forbes knew of your engagement before I did,” continued Jane in a musing tone.—“Only because it seemed better that he should,” replied Katharine. —“And he knew the sacrifice you made for me,” said Jane, turning suddenly round, and looking at her intently. Katharine knelt down by the side of the chair, and raising Jane’s hand to her lips, said: “Dear Mrs. Forbes, he knew only what I could not venture to say to you, that the sacrifice of years instead of months of earthly happiness, would have been all too little for one who long ago guided me on the way to Heaven. Please, may the subject never be mentioned between us again.” Jane’s eyes glistened, and as she laid her hand upon Katharine’s she said,—“there is a blessing which descends from generation to generation. Katharine, it will surely be yours.” It was all that was said, but the words were graven upon Katharine’s heart, deep as a promise which shall never be broken.

CHAPTER LXX.

A BRILLIANT morning—a bright sun—a sky sufficiently clouded for beauty, but not for fear—a fresh, yet warm spring breeze—what could be more inviting for the expedition to Liscombe Abbey? Katharine, when she went down stairs to breakfast, heard the proposal discussed with considerable animation in the house-keeper’s room. She could almost have supposed that the ladies’ maids, and the gentlemen’s gentlemen, were bent upon joining it themselves, so eager were

their conjectures as to the chances of a fine day, and so vehement the contests as to the horses and their riders. Her chief interest was centred in knowing whether Colonel Forbes was likely to be of the party; in her own heart she very much wished he might not be. The Duchess was so overpoweringly anxious and goodnatured, that, if he were absent, she was likely to tire Mrs. Forbes with kindness; and Katharine had already been informed by Lady Marchmont's maid, who knew everything about everybody, that it was the general opinion at Rilworth Castle, that Mrs. Forbes was cooped up a good deal too much, and that the Colonel kept her quite a prisoner; and something like an insinuation had been made, that it was the Duchess's full intention to break through the old system of seclusion, and bring poor Mrs. Forbes out again. Katharine was expected to give either an assent or a contradiction to these surmises, and when neither could be extracted from her, she was pronounced, by Lady Marchmont's maid, dreadfully proud and close; a condemnation which, although uttered so loudly that she could not help hearing it, was very comfortably indifferent to her.

"Miss Ashton has seen nothing of the Castle, yet," said the housekeeper, with an appealing look to several of the party, who were well acquainted with it; "I should think it might be agreeable to go round with her when the riders have started, and her Grace is in the morning room." Barnes, who naturally felt particularly at home, and liked to show that he was, professed extreme willingness to take upon himself the office of leader, if he might be permitted; asserting that he knew where all the curiosities came from, and could tell the names of every picture in the long gallery: and one or two others strangers, like Katharine, seized upon the

idea, as a very pleasant way of ridding themselves of the tedium of a long morning. It was settled, therefore, that they were to meet in the house-keeper's room at twelve o'clock, and Katharine then went up stairs again to be ready for anything that Mrs. Forbes might require. The Castle hours were very late, and she found Colonel Forbes in his wife's room reading to her, according to what was now his usual custom. He was urgent that Jane should have her breakfast at once, and alone. The Duchess, he said, never made her appearance till ten o'clock, and the breakfast was an interminable affair. Jane had much better take hers as she was accustomed, no one would remark upon it; in fact it was quite the common practice of the house. He should be inclined to stay with her himself, he added, only he wanted to hear a little what the plans for the day were. "You are going with them all to Liscombe, dear Philip, are you not?" said Jane.—"I hope you would not think of staying at home for me."—"I am not sure, my dear; Liscombe is nothing new, and you would like me to drive you out."—"Oh! the Duchess will do that," replied Jane; "she told me she would last night—please don't let that prevent you."—"But she will tire you to death, my dear, with talking. I don't know any one more agreeable than the Duchess when one is in good health and spirits, but it really does require a fair amount of both to be with her."—The thought crossed Katharine's mind, as she stood by, waiting to hear what she had to do, that Colonel Forbes had not seen so clearly the Duchess's powers of wearying, when he had urged Jane to come to Rilworth Castle; but it seemed severe to blame him for not having quite overcome his natural and long-fostered fault, especially now, when he seemed so really anxious to consult Jane's comfort. "We might drive through

the park, and over the hill," he continued; "it is much higher ground than at Maplestead, and Lowe always said that fresh pure air was the best tonic you could have."—"I should like it very much, very much indeed," said Jane, putting up her face for him to kiss; "I don't quite think you know how much; but I could not bear to stand in the way if you wanted to ride, so please not to think of me; and remember, Katharine will take excellent care of me."—"I think your mistress does look stronger and better this morning, don't you, Miss Ashton?" said Colonel Forbes, turning to Katharine.—Katharine hesitated a little. She did not see any difference herself, and she knew that Jane had slept badly in consequence of the unusual fatigue of seeing so many people. Colonel Forbes was fretted, because she did not immediately assent, and said, rather in his old tone, that it was never well to make the worst of things when people were not strong: there was nothing they required so much as cheerfulness.—"It is my fault," remarked Jane, in a tone of apology; "if Katharine does not think me very brilliant this morning, for I have been foolishly complaining of fatigue whilst she was dressing me; but I shall forget everything, dear Philip, in the pleasure of a drive with you."—Colonel Forbes walked to the window; his brow was overcast; he had not been thoroughly comfortable ever since he had insisted upon this visit, and now Katharine and Jane both seemed determined to make him feel that he had done an unwise thing.—"I can't say what I shall do," he remarked, perversely. "Perhaps I may be wanted for the riding-party; the Duchess won't like her daughters to go unless there is some one she can trust with them."—"Oh! no, of course; I quite forgot that. Certainly, Philip, you must go." Neither Jane's face nor accent

betrayed anything like annoyance, except to Katharine's eye. She could see a grave shadow flit across it, chased away by the unselfish smile, which in a moment could throw itself into another's wishes.—Colonel Forbes walked moodily to the door, not approaching Jane again, and, turning his head in another direction: "I can't decide anything yet," he said, as he went out of the room; "you had better have your breakfast, Jane." Jane was not inclined for her breakfast then; her husband was vexed with her causelessly, and the weight of former days settled itself upon her heart, in spite of all Katharine's efforts to interest her.

Colonel Forbes did not appear again, and Jane, anxious to learn what he would do, at last sent Katharine to inquire. Barnes, the only person likely to have heard, could tell nothing; there had been great consultations, but none of the gentlemen seemed to know their own minds. All he had heard was, that his master had said he had letters to write, and probably should not be able to go anywhere. This augured ill for his good temper, as Katharine knew by experience. Having letters to write always meant that he was not in a mood for any company but his own. "Here they come," said Barnes, moving away from the foot of the staircase, where he and Katharine had met; "perhaps you can ask him about it yourself." Colonel Forbes and Lord Marchmont crossed the hall from the library. Katharine heard Colonel Forbes say decidedly, "If I am not wanted, I would much prefer staying at home;" to which Lord Marchmont replied, carelessly, that he hoped Colonel Forbes would consult his own pleasure. This seemed conclusive; and she hurried back to Jane to beg her to prepare for going out before luncheon, as the afternoons and evenings were still very cold.

A knock at the door:—the good-natured Duchess was come to see how Mrs. Forbes was, and to recommend her a special remedy against wakefulness; but especially to enjoy a little London gossip. The enjoyment, however, consisting in talking all the time herself, for Jane knew little really of London life, and did not like talking of it. She made, however, an excellent listener, and the Duchess was quite satisfied, and went on and on in the most interminable way, heaping anecdote upon anecdote, and pouring forth a flood of reminiscences upon Jane, which it required much greater strength, both of body and mind, than she possessed, to endure. Katharine heard something, and guessed more, as she went in and out of the room; and if she had not heard, but only seen, she would have been quite sure, from Jane's face, that all this was a great deal too much for her. But it was impossible to give a hint to a Duchess in her own house, especially when she was so very good-natured, and every now and then said, "Now, my dear, I am not tiring you—you are sure I am not tiring you? you must tell me if I am; only if you had but seen Mr. So-and-so——" and then followed an anecdote, of course. Katharine's only hope was in Colonel Forbes. He would certainly come and inquire after Jane soon, and offer to take her out for a drive, and then the Duchess must depart. But Colonel Forbes had letters to write; that is, he lounged away his time in the library, turning over the pages of the Quarterly Review, talking desultory politics with the Duke of Lowther, and bandying compliments and repartees with Lady Marchmont, who was bent upon persuading him to join the riding-party. He did not think of his wife, or, rather, when he thought of her it made him cross; and too much out of humour with himself to make up his mind to please her, he sat

in a most uncomfortable mood, not caring for what he was doing then, because not able to resolve upon what was to be done afterwards. He was a colonel in the army and a member of Parliament, but his dignity did not save him from the consequences of human infirmity.

"Well, Forbes, going or not going?" said Lord Marchmont, entering the library with his wife, dressed in her riding-habit, just as the clock struck twelve. Colonel Forbes shrugged his shoulders, and observed that it was bitterly cold, and he thought the fire the pleasantest sight he was likely to see that day. "Absurdity!" exclaimed Lord Marchmont. "One would imagine you were an old man of sixty. Louisa," appealing to his wife, "do tell him how foolish he makes himself."—"I have been trying to persuade him of the fact all the morning," said Lady Marchmont; "but I have quite lost my influence with him. It was different in the days of 'auld lang syne,' when we made our *debut* together at the Union Ball at Rilworth. I was vain enough then to flatter myself that Colonel Forbes was my most devoted servant."—"You forget the infirmities of age, Lady Marchmont," replied Colonel Forbes. "The Union Ball was antediluvian."—"What a compliment to me!" exclaimed Lady Marchmont. "Of course I am antediluvian too. I shall say nothing more to you, but leave you to the Duchess; and don't flatter yourself that we shall not be a very merry party without you." She said this very good-humouredly, and Colonel Forbes felt a little shaken in his determination to sit by the fire all day. He asked whether every one was ready. "Ready, or nearly ready, or ought to be ready," said Lady Marchmont; "but you must not judge of others by me, for I am a very pattern of punctuality. I have been trained into it ever since I married. Do you know," she added, addressing

her husband, "that if we don't go at once we shall create great ill-will and confusion in the establishment. My maid tells me that they are to make a party to go over the house when we are gone, and exhibit its wonders to all the strangers. Colonel Forbes, they won't at all fancy being excluded from the library." Colonel Forbes stood up, and Lady Marchmont laughed, and declared she had gained the victory; but he was still irresolute. At that instant the Duchess appeared at the door. Checking his irritable feelings, he appealed laughingly to her: "Your Grace is come just in time to prevent my having violent hands laid upon me. Lady Marchmont is almost threatening to carry me off by main force, and take me as a prisoner with the riding-party. She will accept no excuses on the score of age."—"Of course not," said the Duchess, "for your age involves hers; we all grow old together. But, whatever you intend to do, I must beg you all to decide quickly. I have been offering your poor little wife, Colonel Forbes, to drive with me before luncheon, and she has been making a hundred pretty excuses on the score of dutiful obedience to you, and now I find you are going to run away from her." A most unpleasant pang of self-reproach was felt by Colonel Forbes; he bowed, and smiled, and hesitated, and said he should be very sorry to interfere with any of her Grace's plans, and then asked whether Mrs. Forbes seemed inclined for a drive. "Why, really I can't say," was the reply. "I am afraid I may have tired her a little; but she is so vastly agreeable, I could not possibly get away from her. We have been talking for the last hour and a half." A smile passed over Lady Marchmont's face, the meaning of which Colonel Forbes quite understood. "I had better decide upon not going," he said, turning rather abruptly to Lord

Marchmont. "If her Grace will excuse me, I think I had better keep to my first engagement with Mrs. Forbes, and drive her a short distance. She is rather nervous, and does not like trusting herself with any one but myself."—"That means, that you doubt my charioteering powers," observed the Duchess, laughing; "but I forgive you. It is not the first time they have been called in question. Besides," she added, with a pleasant tone of cordial kindness, "I can entirely sympathise with the wish to keep your engagement; you will find no companion more charming."—"Well, then, we may reckon upon you in a quarter of an hour from this time," said Lady Marchmont, returning again to the charge.—"You shall not reckon upon him for anything, Louisa," observed the Duchess; "I will not have any one tormented in my house. He shall go upstairs and talk to his little wife, and do exactly what he pleases. Now, is not that amiable?" she added, laughing, as she appealed to Colonel Forbes.—"Most kind, as your Grace always is," was the reply. "I think perhaps it would be better just to see what Jane wishes!" He was not sorry to escape from the room, for his perverseness was becoming rather too much for his self-command; and when the Duchess so readily agreed to the propriety of his staying with Jane, his will to join the riding-party became on a sudden uncontrollably strong. The nearest way to Jane's room was through the Long Gallery; and as he went on in his moody state, not thinking of anything but himself, he did not hear the voices which might have been heard through the folding-doors leading into the ante-room; and, throwing them open, he came suddenly upon the party of sight-seers, who, tired of waiting for the departure of the riders, had betaken themselves to what was usually considered

public property—the Long Gallery. They were looking at the pictures which Barnes was explaining and commenting upon. Katharine was not there. Colonel Forbes drew back, and the noise at the door made Barnes look round; he went up to his master to excuse himself for what would have seemed an impertinence, but that it was a common practice of the house. Colonel Forbes never vented small humours on his servants, and he was very gracious to Barnes, and pleased that he should find amusement; he even went so far as to inquire why Miss Ashton was not there. “Miss Ashton wished to come, sir, but she did not like to leave my mistress. I think she was reading to her.”—“You should have made her come,” was Colonel Forbes’s reply, “she will not have as good an opportunity again.”—“I told her so, sir, but she would not hear of it. She said Mrs. Forbes was tired, and that she would rather not.”—“Oh! very well,” and Colonel Forbes retreated, and the party in the Long Gallery continued their tour of inspection. It was a very little trifle,—nothing but Katharine’s duty; she was engaged to attend upon Jane, and of course her own pleasures were not to be put in competition with her mistress’s comfort; yet a feeling of self-reproach touched Colonel Forbes’s heart. This was not the only instance of the putting aside of personal inclinations for the duty of making others happy. It was always so; whether the questions were great or small, Katharine Ashton’s determination was always on the side of unselfishness. Yet Colonel Forbes was not then softened by the example. It was too petty for him, and he was too proud to profit by it. Katharine might have taught him to make great sacrifices; but it required deeper, firmer principles to induce him to use the effort required for small ones.

He knocked at Jane's door hastily, begged pardon rather pettishly, when he saw Katharine sitting by her, and said he did not intend to interrupt them.—"Interrupt, dear Philip?" said Jane, her face brightening, "Oh! no, how could that be possible? Are you come to say good-bye before you set off for your ride."—"I came to see how you were," he replied.—"Oh! very tolerably well, I assure you. I shall be quite well after a little rest. I have had the Duchess here," she added, smiling.—"Yes, I know that; you should not have allowed her to tire you."—"Oh! that is all nothing; and you know I could not possibly send her away. But tell me who are going? What a charming day you will have!"—"Every one in the house seems going except the Duchess," said Colonel Forbes; and, after a momentary pause, he added, "she talked about driving you out, Jane."—"Yes, but I rather got out of it," said Jane, laughing. "It is very well in a room; but really the effort of listening in a carriage, and losing half she says—for her voice is despairingly low,—is rather more than I feel equal to!"—"And you told her I was going to drive you," he said.—"I told her I had agreed to go with you, if I did drive at all," replied Jane; "which was quite true; but that was merely a civil excuse. Don't look grave about it, dear Philip, and think you must stay at home and take care of me merely because of that."

It did seem rather a stupid thing to do, at least at that moment Colonel Forbes thought so. Just then something made him look round for Katharine. She had left the room, as she almost always did when he came in. Jane watched the direction of his glance, and interpreted it. "You know I shall not be alone," she said; "Katharine will be with me, She has been reading to me for the last quarter of

an hour, and she will go on as long as I like. Oh! dear, how I shall miss her!" Colonel Forbes did not respond, and Jane continued:—"By-the-by, Philip, I want her to see the house. Can't Barnes take her over?"—"Barnes is going over it now," said Colonel Forbes, shortly.—"Now? how very provoking! and not to let Katharine know! Really he ought to be scolded."—"He did let her know," said Colonel Forbes, "but she said she could not come."—"Because of me," said Jane; "I know that was it. How vexatious! as if I should have cared about being alone for an hour, if it was to give her pleasure; but she always will think of others before herself."—"It is her duty to think of you," was the answer.—"Yes, perhaps so, but there are different ways of doing one's duty; and besides, you know, Philip, we can never look upon Katharine as a common person."—"I don't exactly see that," he replied; "at least whilst she is in your service."—Jane was silent. She could not discuss the point if he did not understand it, and she could see that he was "put out." She returned to the question of the riding-party, thinking that would please him best, and said, "I suppose you are just ready to start."—"I don't know; I never said I was going to start at all."—"Oh! yes, but you are. It will do you so much good, and I shall like so to hear all you have been doing when you come back. You will pass, too, by the Maplestead turnpike, and you can leave a note for me there, and tell them to send it up to the house."—"I rather wish that the Maplestead turnpike was going to be passed by both of us," said Colonel Forbes, moodily. "I don't think I can stay here beyond to-morrow, Jane; there are too many people."—"Oh! you will like them after a day or two," said Jane; "especially if you ride with them to-day, and make yourself

acquainted with them.”—Colonel Forbes felt so extremely like a pettish child! He was most intensely provoked with himself. But there was the old habit of indulged temper, and he said, with some bitterness, “You seem wonderfully anxious to be rid of me, Jane.”—Jane looked up at him with tears in her eyes: “Anxious! Oh, Philip, when I have thought of nothing but my drive all the morning!”

It was an unfortunate speech; it grated against his will. He could scarcely after that say he would leave her. A quick knock was heard at the door, followed immediately by “May I come in?” and the Duchess appeared. “My dear Colonel, I beg ten thousand pardons; Jane, my dear, I hope you will forgive me; but, do you know, I must run away with him. They are all ready, and waiting, and they won’t think of going without him; and at last I was obliged to say I would try and persuade him to let me drive you instead.” Colonel Forbes looked impenetrable, and did not speak. Jane smiled—such an April smile that she was ashamed of it. “You will go, dear Philip, of course?” she said, in the sweetest and most persuasive of tones.—His better feelings were touched. “It is all nonsense,” he said; “they don’t really care about it. I have a shrewd suspicion that Lady Marchmont has a wager depending upon it.”—“Oh, no, I assure you it is all pure love and affection,” said the Duchess, laughing; “but I told them it was very hard upon this poor little sick wife of yours.”

“The sick wife will be only the more charmed to see her husband when he returns,” said Jane, laying her hand fondly on his arm. “Good-bye, dear Philip; now, you are gone.”—Still he hesitated. “I will take excellent care of her,” said the Duchess; “and it is a delicious morning for a drive.” Colonel

Forbes' conscience reproached him so painfully, that he withdrew from Jane, and would not say good-bye. —“Oh! and here is your maid come for orders,” said the Duchess, as just at that instant Katharine appeared at the door. “Going out directly shall we say — Yes, directly,” she repeated, turning to Katharine.—“And now I must give orders for the pony-carriage. Come, my dear Colonel,—what! still irresolute?”—His eye caught Katharine's. She meant nothing—she scarcely understood what was going on; but he fancied it reproachful, and it goaded him. “Good-bye, my love. Miss Ashton, wrap your mistress up well, she is going with the Duchess in the open pony-carriage.” He passed Katharine proudly, and went down stairs, thankful that at any sacrifice he had at last decided.

CHAPTER LXXI.

JANE drove with the Duchess in the pony-carriage; came in less tired than she had expected, and went down to luncheon without resting, because it seemed uncourteous to remain above when the party was so small. There was talking all the time, for the Duchess of Lowther was seldom known to be silent. Katharine found her after luncheon lying on the sofa, exhausted in body and depressed in spirits. She did not know why this should be, she said; it was probably only because of the fatigue. She was not subject to fits of melancholy, and there certainly was no particular cause for the feeling now. Katharine knew herself very well what was the matter. Jane was disappointed; not of the drive, that was a mere trifle, not to be thought of another time; but

the circumstances of the morning had been so like those of former days, they had brought back all her old feelings. Katharine herself was surprised; she had not yet realised how long it must take to cure the indulged fault of years, and she had given Colonel Forbes credit for stronger feelings of regret for the past than he had really felt. She might have been more merciful in her judgment if she had read the secret working of his mind; but we see only the faults of our fellow-creatures, we know little or nothing of the struggles against them. And Colonel Forbes had not yielded without pain; he had not acted as he would have done some months before, following his own inclination without even a thought of what others might feel. Selfish he was still, but his selfishness was a reproach to him. Even the very irritation of feeling which had at last led him to do exactly what he knew Katharine, in his place, would not have done, was a homage to her higher principles. His esteem was now so deep, that he could not be unmindful of her opinion; but his pride was also so great that he would not allow to himself that he was influenced by her. The flinty heart had been struck; but it required a softer, more tender influence, to bid the healing waters flow. Katharine had made him admire unselfishness; but it was only Jane who could teach him to love it.

It was nearly six o'clock. The evening was becoming chilly, and Jane drew her seat nearer to the fire, and enjoyed the quietness of the twilight. Katharine was gone down stairs to tea. The riders were expected to return every moment. Jane listened for them occasionally, but her room looked out upon the flower garden, and she could only catch indistinctly the sounds in the front of the house. It was a time for softening thoughts, and

Jane's memory travelled back through the course of her life, and read, as in the pages of a living book, the steps by which she had reached her present resting-place. Her life had not been happy, but it had been very good for her; a less severe discipline must have failed to work the merciful end which He who loved her had marked out for her. She did not dare to wish one trial altered, to think it better that there should have been one pang less. For herself all had been mercy, and for her husband surely it must be the same. She tried to think that it would be so; that in some way or other the events which were ordered would do their work for him, as she could not but feel they had done for her; and, in the sure confidence of child-like faith, she laid her cares to rest, and reposed upon that untiring, infinite Love, which had become the unfading solace of her existence.

Katharine came to the door to ask how she was, and whether anything could be done for her, and if she would like to dress for dinner, or wait till Colonel Forbes returned. Jane was too comfortable, she said, to move; she would like to wait a little longer. Perhaps Katharine would come again in ten minutes' time. Katharine went away, and Jane returned to her quiet reverie. The ten minutes had passed, a quarter of an hour, twenty minutes; Jane looked at her watch by the light of the fire, and thought that Katharine must have mistaken the time. She touched the bell and listened to hear if it rang. It was not easy to tell, for other distant sounds caught Jane's ear — voices and the trampling of horses; of course, the riding-party returned. She stirred the fire, drew a chair near the sofa, and arranged the few books on the table, that the room might have a cheerful aspect when Colonel Forbes came in, cold and tired as he would

probably be. She was glad now that she had not begun to dress, there would be quite sufficient time to have a little talk with him before dinner, if he would only come at once. Still, delay and great stillness! That was strange, when such a large merry party had just come in, and many of them occupied apartments close to hers. But there was a footstep on the stairs—a man's footstep; it was heavy like Colonel Forbes'. No; she was disappointed, it must have been Lord Marchmont. His dressing-room was at the other end of the gallery. Jane felt impatient and reproached herself. Why should she expect Philip to come to her at once? Probably they were all in the library telling the Duchess what they had seen and done. She heard the trampling of the horses as they were led round to the stables, and supposed that the dressing-bell would ring immediately. That was very provoking, it would prevent her seeing anything of Philip before dinner, and afterwards there would be politics and music, and then she would go to bed too tired to talk. But Jane would not even then be impatient. She rang the bell quite gently, and before she thought it could have been heard, there was a gentle tap at the door, followed by the entrance of the Duchess of Lowther.

She came up to Jane without speaking, and stood with her face hidden from the light of the fire, which, in these moments of delay, had sunk from a brilliant blaze into a dull red. Then she said, in a voice full of agitation, but which she was evidently trying to keep in the tone of indifference. "The riding-party have returned."

It was marvellous to Jane afterwards, how the light flashed upon her in that one moment. She was not agitated like the Duchess; but she rose and stood by her, and said, without the smallest faltering

in her voice, "You need not be afraid to tell me ; something has happened to Philip."—The Duchess burst into tears : "An accident, nothing more ; pray don't be frightened ; don't think it worse than it is." And the Duchess sat down on the sofa and sobbed hysterically.—"If you will tell me where he is I will go to him," said Jane ; but the Duchess only shook her head, and uttered indistinctly : "Not here, not here, at Maplestead."—"Then I will go to Maplestead," was Jane's reply.—"Yes, yes, your maid said she knew you would ; she will be here directly. Dear Jane, I thought I could have done better ; but indeed it may not be so bad, there is no limb broken." Jane rested against the wall, trembling violently, but she was silent.

When Katharine knocked, it was the Duchess who told her she might enter. Jane was cold as a marble statue. Katharine went up to her, and gently forcing her to sit down, said, "The carriage is ordered, ma'am ; it will be here directly." Jane caught her hand, her lips framed a word, but her voice could not utter it. — "Tell her about it, Miss Ashton," said the Duchess ; "I could not."—"The horse plunged and threw him, and when they took him up he was insensible ; that is all we know," said Katharine. "All," she repeated again. "It happened near Maplestead, and they have taken him there. Jane's hand shook violently, but she did not shed a tear. The Duchess was frightened, and, calling Katharine to her, whispered, "Had we not better send for a medical man?" — "There will be one at Maplestead. If your Grace will be good enough to give orders that the carriage should be brought round, I think that will be the best thing," said Katharine. She went back to Jane, and said, in the same very quiet way, "I will bring your things, ma'am, if you will put them on;" and then,

placing Jane's shawl and bonnet by her side, she left her to help herself, even more than usual, whilst she busied herself with packing. The Duchess seemed perfectly bewildered. Unable to leave Jane, unable to help her, she could only say to herself, "Poor little thing! poor child; If she could only cry!" And then aloud to Jane, "Now, my love, let me put your shawl on, you will very soon be there. I dare say he will be in sense then. He was only stunned, there was no limb broken." Consolation, which Jane might have heard, but to which it seemed she had no power to reply.

They went down stairs; the Duke was in the hall, no one else. Lord Marchmont had gone to Maplestead. It was impossible to speak words of comfort; to say anything indeed but good-bye only. Katharine had placed Jane in the carriage, and was about to enter it herself when the poor Duchess called her back, and said, in a voice scarcely intelligible from broken sobs, "Miss Ashton, you will let me know yourself how she is. Poor little thing! You will be sure to write to me. I would rather hear from you than any one."

They reached Maplestead. Jane had not spoken a word during the long twelve miles' drive. She would not even lean back in the carriage; but, sitting upright, gazed fixedly on the trees, and hedges, and fields, as they seemed to flee from them in the twilight. Lord Marchmont came to the hall-door, and she took his arm, and went upstairs mechanically. Katharine followed. Lord Marchmont left them at the door of Colonel Forbes' room. Jane opened it herself and went in. The curtain was drawn around the bed, and she pushed it aside with a slow determination which was fearful in its self-command. She gazed upon her husband,

but there was no eye to notice her; she touched his hand, but it was deadly cold; at last she murmured 'Philip,' and the soft sound of her own voice, as it seemed to echo through the silent room, touched the over-strained chord of feeling, and sinking on her knees, she hid her face by the bedside, and wept in anguish.

Katharine was comforted then, and left her. Mr. Fowler was in the adjoining room, and she went to speak to him. He said it was a critical case. He would not go so far as to call it one of great danger, but he recommended further advice. The injury was very complicated, principally on the head; it was worse than a broken limb. He did not think, however, that there was any fear of the brain, which was what Katharine most dreaded, and he thought that Colonel Forbes might be restored to sense before many hours were past. Even then Katharine was struck with Mr. Fowler's manner. His great anxiety was for Jane. He begged that she might not be allowed to sit up, or exert herself. He reminded Katharine again and again, that she was to speak of everything cheerfully, and that she was not to repeat all he might say to her; and when, in the midst of the conversation, Jane herself came in, his manner was almost painful to Katharine, there was so much more hope in it than she could think him justified in giving, knowing as he did the peril of the case.

Jane was as anxious now as she had been apparently stony before, but still all was done and said with great outward composure of manner. She made Mr. Fowler give every direction to herself, and even suggested things which might be necessary. It was as if she had cast off all the shrinking timidity and nervousness of her character, and her spirit had suddenly risen to new energy in

the consciousness of a great emergency. Katharine asked her if she was tired, and she said, yes, she thought she was ; but she did not sit down, except for a few minutes, for nearly an hour. At the end of that time she consented to have a sofa moved near the bed, and lay down upon it ; but she did not close her eyes, and watched every restless movement of her husband, and started up at every sound, in a way which gave little hope of her obtaining any rest through the night. Katharine was obliged to yield to all this—it was Mr. Fowler's advice. Opposition, he said, would be worse for her than any other excitement ; but he promised to give her a sleeping draught, which might procure her some hours' rest, and by that time, his own opinion was, that Colonel Forbes would be restored to sense.

Katharine did not know what she had gone through herself, till about twelve o'clock at night, when Jane having consented to sleep in the dressing-room, and Barnes being placed as a watcher by Colonel Forbes, she found herself at liberty to retire to her own room, and began to write a hasty note to Charles. The effects of fatigue and fear then were painfully felt. Her hand shook so that she could scarcely hold her pen, and it seemed at first impossible to collect her thoughts, so as to frame a connected sentence ; but the consciousness of perfect sympathy, and the thought of his love, were unspeakably resting ; and at last wearied out in body, yet soothed in mind, she fell into a disturbed sleep.

CHAPTER LXII.

MAPLESTEAD was strangely unnatural the next morning. Lord Marchmont breakfasted alone in the library, preparatory to his return to the Castle. Mr. Fowler waited in Colonel Forbes' bedroom for the arrival of a surgeon from the county town. Jane, the first agony of excitement over, lay almost as helpless as her husband in the dressing-room; and Katharine, still thinking first of her, endeavoured to soothe the eager fears with which she listened to every sound, by reading to her the morning Psalms.

Mr. Fowler was mistaken. Colonel Forbes did not recover his consciousness in a few hours. The injury seemed worse than had at first been anticipated; fever was coming on, and in the few words he uttered there were signs of delirium. An attempt was made to keep all this from Jane, but she was not to be deceived, and Katharine thought it would be better not to try to deceive her. Whatever she had to say herself she said openly. She told her that the symptoms were not so good; that Mr. Fowler was very anxious, but not in any way hopeless; and Jane's mind rested upon every word which Katharine spoke with that perfect conviction of truth which alone can give repose. She was very winning and touching in her grief; so thoughtful, and gentle, and obedient,—yet so unutterably wretched. Katharine read truly all that was in her mind, — the agonising suspense, the intensity of her inward entreaty that her husband might not be taken from her suddenly, without preparation. It could not be spoken of—that overwhelming thought of awe; but the hours were

passed in stillness and prayer by his bedside ; and Jane would often sit with Katharine's hand in hers, tears coursing each other down her cheeks, and her eager eyes fixed upon the face so dear to her, as if striving to read by the prophetic power of her deep love the fate that was reserved for them both.

Strange it might have seemed that one already so purified by suffering should be called upon to endure such bitter grief. But who may venture to judge what shall be needed for the work of educating the soul for Heaven, before that work is accomplished ?

So passed the morning hours ; in the afternoon the new surgeon arrived, and fresh remedies were adopted ; in the evening, as Jane stood bending over her husband, he looked up at her with a faint smile, and whispered her name. That was a moment of exquisite happiness—almost it repaid her for the long hours of agony which had gone before. Yet it was not to last. There was a fear of relapse—a dread of some internal injury not yet discovered—and again Jane's spirit sank, not as it had done before (for he knew her, and could speak to her), but yet with anticipations of evil which she could not conquer.

Moments in a sick room pass very slowly, and days are weeks to the watchers by a bed of suffering. A dreary calmness brooded over Maplestead—not so much the quietness after a tempest which has past as the dulness of dread, lest another may be gathering. Three days after the accident the household had fallen into the habits natural to anxiety and nursing. There were those who waited by day, and those who sat up at night ; and by these duties all others were regulated. Silence fell like the shadow of death upon the empty chambers, the deserted passages ; laughter sank into a smile ; words of wel-

come were exchanged for looks of anxious inquiry ; and rumour, busy with the events of which it caught only the distant sound, already occupied itself with thoughts of the future.

Candidates for the anticipated vacant seat in parliament were suggested by significant glances and circuitous modes of speech. Votes were reckoned in private, and vague propositions made with the idea of sounding the minds of certain influential persons. Outwardly, all was decorous sympathy ; but grave looks and altered tones showed clearly that the people of Rilworth believed that Colonel Forbes would die.

Did he think so himself? Did the echo of that solemn undertone, the ground-swell of death, reach to his sick-chamber? Such seasons are not always those of clear perception. The body holds the mastery over the soul, and thought and feeling are too often devoted wholly to its service. Colonel Forbes thought of little but his own suffering at first. He was in great pain, and he was not used to it. It seemed a hardship, and it surprised him. But he never imagined that it would not be subdued in time ; he did not even realise the fact that he had ever been in danger. But the sharp pain did not subside, and still there were grave faces around his bed, and long and anxious consultations ; and at last—it was a week after the accident—Jane stood by his bedside, and told him that she had a favour to ask—a great favour—he must not deny her ; she wished that Doctor Lowe should be sent for. He looked at her in wonder. “Lowe, my dear! you are laughing at me. What good can Lowe do me?”—“None, perhaps,” said Jane, sadly, “except be a comfort to me.”—“But, my love, I must not have you fanciful. You must not be over anxious about me, Jane,” and he gazed at her

kindly and sorrowfully.—“Mr. Fowler would be more satisfied,” said Jane.—“Fowler is a fool!” he exclaimed, in his old impatient way; but he was sorry that he had spoken so when he saw how Jane’s countenance changed, and he smiled and called her his foolish, little, anxious wife.—“Then we may send for Dr. Lowe,” said Jane, timidly.—“Send for any doctor you please, my love, but don’t flatter yourself that he or any one else will do me any good. Time is the only thing. If I could but get up my appetite, and sleep better, and be rid of this terrible, dull aching at my side, I should be quite myself.”—“Yes,” said Jane; “but, dear Philip, you would not object to see Dr. Lowe if it made me happier?”—“I don’t object to anything, my love; but I don’t like you to wear yourself out with fancies. You look like a ghost as it is. Why don’t you lie down?”—“I cannot rest, Philip; I would rather sit by you.”—“Not rest, you foolish child? What is there to prevent your resting? There are plenty to do anything I may require.”—“But I would rather do it all myself, dear Philip, if I might.” He tried to turn in the bed to look at her, but weakness and pain were too much for him, and he groaned in suffering. Jane went round to the other side, and endeavoured to ease him by raising the pillows; he scarcely thanked her, but he did not like her to go away, and she stood by him in silence. Presently something seemed to cross his mind as to what had been said, and he asked again, “What made you think, Jane, of sending for Lowe?”—“It was not my thought,” said Jane, gently.—“Oh! then it was Miss Ashton’s. Sensible woman as she is, I wonder she does not know better than to indulge in fancies.”—“No, it was not Katharine,” replied Jane; “it was Mr. Fowler. I thought I said so.” Colonel Forbes did not reply; his face was turned aside, and she could

not see its expression. He did not move again, but seemed likely to sleep, yet the ringing of the hall-door bell roused him, and he said, "If that is Fowler, I wish to see him alone." Jane left him, and went to the head of the stairs. Katharine met her there, and asked how Colonel Forbes was. "Much the same, perhaps in rather more pain." It seemed as if all her energy had suddenly forsaken her, and she sat down on the upper step of the staircase and cried bitterly.—"He will allow Dr. Lowe to be sent for I hope, ma'am?" said Katharine.—"Yes, he says so now; but he may change again. Oh, Katharine, he thinks so lightly about it all!" This was the root of her grief, and Katharine could not comfort it.—"I will go down and speak to Mr. Fowler," she said, trying to divert Jane's thoughts; "and I will tell you, ma'am, before he goes." And as Mr. Fowler was heard coming up the stairs, Jane rose up suddenly, and rushed away.

It was not a long conference between Colonel Forbes and Mr. Fowler; when it was ended Mr. Fowler sat down in the library to write to Dr. Lowe. Strict orders were given for perfect stillness; it was thought that Colonel Forbes would sleep.

And he did sleep for a few moments—nature was worn out by pain; but it was only a short repose; he woke to toss his head restlessly from side to side, and moan in the extremity of his suffering, and then try to sleep again, and all the time to have before him a horrible phantom—yet not a phantom, a reality—a presence of danger from which he could not escape—a fear which could not be soothed—an anguish for which he could find no opiate.

He was a brave man—physically brave; he would have faced death in the battle-field, and called it glory; but to know that it might be stealing upon him unperceived; to be called to meet his enemy

calmy and deliberately, with memory busied in the past, and conscience goading him to gaze upon the future,—that was a trial for which no mortal strength could suffice.

He had asked the question, and it had been answered unflinchingly as it was put; for who would have thought of hiding the truth from a man strong in mental power like Colonel Forbes? The internal injury had not yet been reached; if this were not soon done, a few days, Mr. Fowler believed, would probably put it beyond the reach of human skill. That was the thought which Colonel Forbes carried with him to his dreams, and brought back with him to his waking hours. He did not speak of it; he did not speak, indeed, of anything for the remainder of that day, except what might concern his illness. Jane thought him drowsy, and he allowed her to believe it; or if he moaned in the anguish of his heart, she fancied that the pain he endured was becoming more unbearable.

She might have been happier if she had known the truth; any suffering would, in her eyes, have been better than the insensibility which she believed had stolen over his heart, and from which she did not dare, in his present state, to rouse him.

That was a very long day, for Dr. Lowe could scarcely arrive till the evening. Katharine had sat up the previous night, and was obliged to take some rest, as it was possible her services might be required again till very late.

About four o'clock she went into Colonel Forbes' room, and found him lying in the same apparently torpid state, and Jane half-sitting, half-reclining, in an arm-chair placed by the bedside; a servant was in the dressing-room, so that everything could be procured that might be wanted; and Katharine,

feeling that her own strength and spirits must be recruited, if she hoped to be of any use, asked if she could be spared to take a few turns in the park. Jane smiled an assent, and begged that she would stay as long as she possibly could,—nothing would be wanted till Dr. Lowe came. There was such a ghastly attempt at cheerfulness in her manner as she said this, that Katharine could scarcely summon courage to leave her; but Jane insisted upon it strongly, and Katharine went out.

CHAPTER LXXIII.

THE evening was very mild, warm as April, though the season was only the beginning of March. Katharine walked towards Moorlands, it was her natural direction whenever she was alone. The thoughts which it awoke were often mournful, but they were more interesting to her than any others. She went on slowly this evening, thinking less perhaps of herself and those immediately belonging to her, than usual. The suspense of life or death in whatever form it may present itself, for the time absorbs into itself all other interests. That last week had been like a horrible dream from which Katharine had not yet awakened. All was changed, even Jane herself; she was living a life most strange for her, a life which Katharine would, a short time before have thought must be fatal to her; yet she was bearing up against it, and never allowed that her strength was giving way. If she neither ate nor slept (and Katharine knew that it was seldom she could do either), the excessive fatigue seemed to have little or no effect upon her. And she was in

general too very calm, though once or twice Katharine had detected symptoms of nervousness, which without great self-command would have seemed likely to be uncontrollable. Could all this last? and if it did not, what would be the re-action? Katharine trembled to think; she tried resolutely to turn from all fear and trust; but that was not so easily done, for still unbidden, the thought came again and again, stealthily creeping into her mind in every form, till they had carried her far into days which she might never live herself to see, but in which she had traced the course of the children, orphans as it seemed probable they might soon be; and mourned for sorrow, the very beginning of which might still, in the Mercy of God, be spared them.

Katharine was conscious then how little such thoughts could profit her, and raising her eyes to give herself new impressions she saw standing directly before her,—Charles Ronaldson. Her exclamation of intense delight jarred upon her own ears, it seemed unfeeling; but it was the sweetest music to him; and as he drew her arm within his, he said, “I had thought of writing, but I should have lost great happiness, the happiness of contrast. Katharine, it seems now that I would not for worlds have been spared those years of trial, if with them I must have lost also the blessedness of feeling that all is now so different.”—“So very, very different!” repeated Katharine; “it almost seems wrong to feel how light every trouble is when you are near.”—“But you have had great trouble,” he said, “that made me so anxious to come. I knew I might be here to-day, and remain till the day after to-morrow, but I would not tell you for fear of disappointment. You are looking terribly worn, dearest.”—“Every one is that now at Maplestead,” said Katharine; “but no one thinks of it, dear

Charles; it has been, and is, a terrible time.”—“Is? but Colonel Forbes is surely out of danger?”—“He is in sense,” said Katharine; “but no one can say more. Mr. Fowler thinks badly of him.”—“And Mrs. Forbes?”—“I don’t know how she is, I could never describe it, it is wonderful; but it cannot last.” He turned round to her quickly; “Katharine, I am fearfully selfish, but I must ask,—you will not let all this make a difference?” She did not instantly answer, for her heart beat very quickly, and her voice seemed to have failed her. He stopped suddenly, and was about to repeat the question, but she interrupted him: “Charles, I have promised, and my first duty is now to you. You will trust me?”—“Implicitly, as I would trust the word of an angel. God forgive me, if my fear was wrong.” He walked on silently, it seemed as if his conscience was reproaching him. They sat down under the branches of a spreading oak, still, however, leafless. The unusual warmth of the evening seemed oppressive to him, and he took off his hat and laid it down beside him. Katharine took it up. “I will rule for once,” she said; “you shall not take cold.” He smiled, and answered, “You shall rule for always, if you will; I can have no jealousy of your authority.”—“I would not trust you,” replied Katharine; “I am not your wife yet.”—“And you think I shall change?” he said.—“No indeed, indeed, I think only that you will one day become accustomed to me, and see me as I am.—Oh! Charles;” and she sighed, “that is the fear which would frighten me, if anything could, when I think of you.”—“It may be a mutual fear,” he said, gravely; “but Katharine,” and his voice grew more cheerful, “we have known each other long enough.”—“Yes, but still,—don’t think I am speaking or thinking of ourselves—I could not, it would be impossible to be afraid; but when one

sees what may be the end of deep love, how it may all melt away, it does frighten one.”—“There must have been a fault at the beginning in those cases,” he replied.—“Not always,” said Katharine, thoughtfully.—“We can never tell,” he replied; “people are punished for faults of ignorance, as well as for those which are wilful. Perhaps in questions of marriage, ignorance is in a measure wilful; we will not see what we do not like to see, and yet we may be sure that the faults which are exhibited to others before marriage, will be exhibited to ourselves afterwards. “Constant little faults would weary my love, I am afraid,” said Katharine; “daily selfishness for instance. I could much better bear many greater failings.”—Charles laughed. “Thank you, I shall know now what I have to expect.”—“I don’t think you have any faults,” said Katharine, simply; “that is,” she added, as she saw him look grave, “I can’t see them.”—“Take them upon faith, dearest,” he answered; “it will be happier for us both. But tell me more about Maplestead. Is Mrs. Forbes so very miserably anxious?”—“The grief has passed beyond my sympathy now,” said Katharine; “we never speak of it. And I am allowed to do very little. That frets me, sometimes, I seem suddenly to have become nothing.”—“Then you will have more time to spare for me,” he said; “but, Katharine, she will surely break down suddenly.”—“That is my fear,” she replied; “but I must not talk about it, Charles, it unfits me for what I have to do; and though I say that I am allowed to do nothing, I know that really it is of consequence that I should be able to keep up, if it is only to prevent other people from blundering.”—“And Mrs. Forbes then does nothing but attend to her husband?” said Charles.—“I do not think she has a thought for anything else,” replied Katharine;

“though I have known her so long and so intimately, I never understood till now what her feeling for him is. I am sure he himself has never comprehended it in the least. He would have been a different man if he had done so.” — “He may have comprehended it,” said Charles, “without returning it.” — “No,” replied Katharine; “I do not think that is possible. I do not believe we can comprehend anything in feeling except from our own feeling.” — “That means that Colonel Forbes is selfish, and does not understand unselfishness,” said Charles; “you are very cautious, Katharine, but the world has known that long ago.” Katharine sighed. “I do not quite approve of your doctrine, though,” he continued; “I could never say that my love was not selfish, and yet, indeed, I trust I can understand yours.” — “Your love is not selfish,” said Katharine; “if it had been I should not be where I am,—at Maplestead. Oh! Charles, if it had been otherwise—I may say it; may I not, now?—I could not have loved you.” He paused for a moment, and then in a low voice said, “That frightens me; I may have deceived you.” — “No,” exclaimed Katharine, eagerly, “impossible; with the experience of such long years, impossible. It is the realisation of the dream which I have had from childhood;” she continued. “From the first moment, that is, when I could think what love might be. It has been such a marvel to me; I have seen it so unlike, so very unlike anything that I could esteem or desire; and I was told that it could not be different,—that it must always make people forgetful of others, that it must take the place for the time, even of the highest, most unearthly love; and so I dreaded it. I shrank even from the thought of it, or if I did think, I had my own visions, but they were lonely ones, I had no one to share them with; no one could understand them.” — “It may be so

still," he said, interrupting her. She smiled brightly, and replied, "I have no fear. We could not love each other if we did not love God first." They stood up to return to the house, for it was late, and the sun was sinking low in the horizon. Charles lingered still, leaning against the tree. "Katharine," he said, "it is very hard to part with this indefinite time before me; harder now than it was months ago."—"It shall not be parting for one moment longer than you yourself shall say is right," she replied; and then, as a blush crimsoned her face, she added, "Have I not said more than even you would venture to ask?" The answer was in action, not in words, but the kiss which he imprinted on her forehead showed that even he was satisfied.

CHAPTER LXXIV.

THAT evening Jane knelt by the side of her husband, and prayed, as only those can pray who feel that on the balance of life or death hangs the destiny, not of Time but of Eternity. She might have deceived herself before, but she could do so no longer. The little faults in daily life so constant as scarcely to be regarded; the habitual neglect, the increasing indifference to religion, which had been dawning upon her for years, stood forth now in startling clearness. He, whom with all the clinging tenderness of her nature, she had loved through years of disappointment and indifference, was about, it might be, to pass into the dread presence of his Maker, with the burden of those years still upon his conscience. Oh! for an arm to rouse him while yet

there was time—a voice to whisper in his ear, “Prepare to meet thy God.”

But he lay silent—suffering; unthinking, so it seemed, of all but the physical pain he was enduring; anxious, so it seemed, for nothing but the arrival of the physician who might soothe him with the flattering hope that death was yet far off. Many times he had asked to be told the hour, sent messengers down the avenue to look out for the carriage; at last Katharine herself was stationed at the window to give the earliest notice of Dr. Lowe’s arrival. It was the agonising longing for life,—did he think what was involved in it? “There are the carriage wheels,—I hear them,” and Jane staggered rather than walked to the window at which Katharine was standing. The carriage turned into the avenue. Jane turned more than pale, her face was death-like. “Go to meet him, Katharine,” she said; “take him to the dressing-room, I will follow you;” and then slowly she returned to her husband, and said, “Philip, dear, Dr. Lowe is come.” He looked his comprehension of her meaning, but he did not express either pleasure or pain; and she sat down again, for she could not stand. There was an intense stillness in the house; the hall-door was far off, and they could not hear the carriage drive up. Colonel Forbes’ hand rested on the coverlid; he raised himself up feebly, and laid it upon Jane’s head, as she leant it against his pillow. “Jane, my best treasure;” she started, and throwing herself on her knees, caught his hand, and covered it with kisses.—“Pray for me that I may be forgiven,” and sinking back again, he closed his eyes, and Jane, as in a voice scarcely audible she repeated the fifty-first Psalm, could not tell, even by the motion of his lips, that he was conscious of her words.

Low voices were heard in the adjoining room. Jane said quietly to her husband, "Will you see Dr. Lowe now?" and he faintly gave assent, and she went in. Katharine was there too. Jane's manner was, what it had ever been, composed almost to coldness, but something in her tone struck Katharine as changed; it was as if she breathed more freely. Dr. Lowe forbade her going back, he wished to be alone with his patient, he said; at least with only the medical man who had been attending him. Jane seated herself, but she did not appear to want support. Her limbs seemed rigid. Katharine stood by her, and neither of them spoke.

Long, long, very long it appeared to Katharine. Jane had no consciousness of time; she was not living in this world. Some one in the inner room twisted the handle of the door, and then went back again. Katharine's knees trembled violently; she leant against the wall. Jane looked up:—"You had better sit down, Katharine, you will be tired;" and Katharine took her place in the window-seat. Again the handle of the door was touched. Mr. Fowler opened it, and asked for paper, and pens, and ink. It was Jane who gave them. Katharine's head was dizzy; she could not see where they were. Once more a step was heard, slow and heavy,—then a pause,—a murmuring consultation. Katharine glanced at Jane, and saw that her hands were clasped together, as if held by bars of iron, but even then there was but the stern compression of the lips, the dark deep line around the fixed eye, to mark the inward agony. And the door opened, and the physician entered. Katharine could not go. She stood behind Jane's chair. Dr. Lowe spoke at once. "My dear Mrs. Forbes, he is very ill, but there is much to hope;" and the rush

of Jane's tears was like the torrent of rain which tells that the darkness of the thunder-cloud has passed.

He spoke kindly and soothingly to her, as one who had known her long, and shared her fears with more than ordinary sympathy. He said that the symptoms which had alarmed them were not as dangerous as had been supposed; that the shock Colonel Forbes had received was very great, but that with a naturally strong constitution there was no reason to fear that he would not ultimately rally. But he said also that he would not deceive her by telling her there was no cause to fear; until the pain was entirely subdued, there must be. And Jane covered her face with her hands, and Katharine heard her murmur, "Thy will be done."

Colonel Forbes hovered between life and death; each day saw but little change. The pain, the symptom of danger, was very obstinate; but it did begin to subside at last, and he was able, though very weak, to be moved from his bed to the sofa. Jane nursed him still; he would bear no other attendant; or rather, if he spoke of bearing it, her altered countenance showed the pain he was giving by the proposal. So they passed hour after hour together. He spoke little, except to ask Jane how she felt, and beg her not to tire herself, but lay quietly thinking. Jane sat by him, and sometimes read to him for a short time, though in a feeble voice, for her breath was short and faint. He seemed to have no choice as to the book. It was always left to Jane to say what it should be; and his thoughts frequently seemed wandering to other things. But she read on still; it was enough for her happiness that the sound of her voice cheered him. Often he gazed upon her fixedly, and there were moments when the dark knitting of the brow

which had once betokened his inward agitation, was seen again working almost convulsively. But if she asked what ailed him, it was gone.

Since that one prayer for her prayers, uttered as in the very presence of death, not one word had passed between them on the subject of religion, except that he would, morning and evening, point to the Prayer Book and Bible, and ask her to read to him; and then his voice would be heard in the Confession and the Lord's Prayer, and at the close he would thank her, and bid her kiss him.

Was he penitent? was he grateful? was he hopeful? Who could tell?

They had passed three weeks together in this way. Colonel Forbes was recovering his strength, and was able to walk about his room, and talked of soon going out. Jane always went out a little in the middle of the day, if the weather was fine, but she could walk only a very little distance, and often it happened that she would stop, seized by a sudden tremor—a heart sickness, like the ebbing of the tide of life.

She had been walking one afternoon a little earlier than usual: it was so beautiful that she was tempted out by Katharine, and Colonel Forbes urged her to go also; he always did urge her now, anxiously. He would not let her stay with him, or read to him, or do anything which might over-fatigue her, if he could help it.

They sat out of doors some little time, upon the terrace, and the children came to them. Jane had seen but little of them lately; they had naturally been kept away from their father's sick-room in the day-time, and only went to him to wish him "good night," and it was a new delight to her to have them about her, and hear their cheerful voices. She talked a good deal about them to Katharine; and said what she had observed of their dispositions, what

were likely to be their temptations in life, and how it would be well for them to be treated. She was afraid, she said, that her own reserve might stand in the way of gaining their confidence. It was a dread which she had always had, more or less, particularly during the last few months. "Colonel Forbes is reserved, too," she added, "and with both parents shut up from them, it will be hard for them." Katharine observed that as the children grew older, and were more her companions, this feeling of reserve might wear off. "Perhaps so." She paused. "If anything were to happen to me, I should like Miss Forbes to have the care of them. She would be very kind to them, and she would make Philip happy." "If that were possible then," said Katharine. Jane's pallid face flushed a little. "I shrink from the thought of his unhappiness, Katharine; but I should not like him to forget me. I do not think he will," she added, after a moment's thought. Lucy had been walking by Katharine's side unperceived, and, looking up in her mother's face, she said, "Why should papa forget you? He called you an angel last night, to Philip and me." There was a pause.—"Papa calls me that because he loves me, dear child," said Jane; "but there are no angels living on earth." And she walked on silently. "Papa does think her an angel, though," said Lucy, lowering her voice, as if only wishing Katharine to hear; "and he cried last night when he said it. I never saw him cry before." Katharine felt Jane's arm press more heavily upon her, and asked her to sit down, but she said no, she would go in-doors. Katharine went with her to the door of her dressing-room, but Jane would not let her remain to assist in taking off her walking things; she said she would go at once to Colonel Forbes; they had been

away from him some time. The children followed. Jane made a sign to them to go in very quietly, for she thought he was asleep; but he was not, he had been reading. Jane knelt down by him, and kissed him, and smoothed his hair, and he looked at her fondly, and observed that she had been long away. Her heart was very full, and she said timidly, "Do you miss me?" The strange contraction of the brow was visible, which always frightened her, and she trembled. "If mamma is an angel, papa," said Lucy, "you must miss her."—"Angels live in Heaven, my darling," said Jane, gently but reprovingly; "and you must not stay and talk now; nurse will be waiting for you." Philip jumped upon his father's sofa, and kissed him, and then both went away. Colonel Forbes scarcely noticed them; his eye rested upon Jane. It had a strange eager expression, as if he was gazing upon something unreal. Once more she spoke. The question was wrung from her by the sorrow of years. "Philip, if I were gone, should you miss me?" A pause—a glance—oh! how vivid in its expression of the soul's bitterness,—and the barriers around the proud heart were broken down, and the cold, haughty, selfish man of the world leant his head upon the shoulder of his gentle wife, and sobbed convulsively:

Miss her! Would to God!—it was the prayer of his spirit's agony—that she might be spared to him, though it were at the sacrifice of all else that was precious to him on earth, so that he might but prove his love and his repentance. Miss her! Would not life be death without her? Would there be hope, or joy, or fear, if the sun of his daily existence was taken from his sight? And almost wildly he clasped her in his arms, as if dreading that even at that hour the decree which was to separate them had gone forth.

And then the feeling changed, and it was not sorrow, but compunction, remorse, the hidden grief which had been corroding his heart since first he had stood face to face with his past life, and gazed upon that most awful of all sights—a soul, the life of which has been apart from God. He poured it forth with all the fiery impulse of one in whom the pent-up springs of a higher life have by one sudden shock been set free. He told it fully, freely, without self-excuse, or reservation. God had in mercy forced him to look upon his own heart in the presence of death, and there was nothing else worthy of dread.

No, he could not be proud now ; least of all in the presence of her whom he loved, and yet had deceived in her dearest hope—the hope that they were united for Eternity. It was peace, even in its humiliation, to trace how the light had dawned upon him—how, insensible to the daily love and goodness to which his eye had become accustomed, he had been first awakened to the contrast between the service of God and the service of self, by the simple self-devotion of Katharine Ashton : how then he had thought that he would improve, and strive to correct his faults by the aid of his own reason ; and how the deeply-rooted habit, the long-indulged feelings, had been too strong for him, and, mastering him in little things, might well have carried him back again to the downward course which he had so blindly followed, but that a strong Hand had interposed to save him, even at the risk of his earthly life, from the peril of those who forget God. It was a tale of deep repentance, and Jane listened to it, kneeling still by his side, dizzy and bewildered in her thankfulness ; her cold hands clasped in his, her head reclining upon his breast ; and, at last, whilst still he was speaking, she fainted away.

CHAPTER LXXV.

THERE was a great change in Jane from that evening ; Katharine was the first to perceive it. Happy she was, indeed,—intensely happy ; but the feeling was too great for her. If, by her husband's care, repose had been granted to her years before, it might have given a fresh spring to her life ; now she was too weak for joy, and it crushed her. But so it is : repent though we may, earnestly, bitterly, we cannot undo the past : forgiven though, through God's Mercy, we may hope we are, we still must bear the punishment in this world entailed upon transgression.

Colonel Forbes had been told that his wife's existence, humanly speaking, depended upon kindness and care, and he neglected her. Now, when he would have thought wealth, and political prospects, and worldly reputation, all too little to purchase but a single year of life, it was too late. Yet it was difficult for Katharine to realise what she knew was Jane's danger. She was so calm, so quiet, so cheerful ; her voice, though feeble, told of such a spring of inward happiness ! It was not like the decay of consumption. She was very thin, but she had no cough, no hectic flush. Even when she complained of illness, it was only of sudden faintness, sharp throbs of pain, feelings which she could not account for ; and when these were past, the stream of her happiness seemed to flow on again, pure and glad in her husband's presence, as the mountain rill, long hidden amongst rocks, bursts forth for a space, and glitters in the light ere its waters are blended with the ocean. She lived, perhaps, less

in her husband's room than before. He was becoming much stronger, and could better attend to himself, and he was very anxious for her to be in the open air; but the hours which she did spend with him were more really life than the whole course of her previous married existence. She had lost her fear of him, and they talked without reserve, and both perhaps forgot the sword which hung over them in the joy of their newly-found sympathies. Colonel Forbes, indeed, had never thoroughly understood what he could not bear to believe; and now, when he took such care of her, and was so desirous that his wishes should not interfere with her comfort, and felt so vexed when she seemed to have exerted herself too much, it was not with any definite feeling of fear; it was only that his treasure was new to him, and therefore he guarded it the more anxiously.

One morning, a Sunday morning, about a month from that time, Jane rose earlier than was her wont, for she was to go to church with her husband, only for the second time since his illness; not to the whole service, however; it was now some time since she had been equal to that, on the Communion Sundays; but she was to join him there after the sermon.

Katharine stayed at home with her. She had been so used to attend upon her, that no one else could well have taken her place. Colonel Forbes, when he left her, remarked that she looked dreadfully ill that morning, and, for a few minutes, he seemed undecided whether to go or stay; but Jane was very earnest with him to go, and assured him that it was merely her usual morning face, only he had not before observed it. He appealed to Katharine, and she, too, thought that Jane looked very

worn, but she changed so rapidly that there might not really be cause to think her worse than usual.

And she did seem to rally when she was dressed, and walked down stairs with a firm, easy step, and even took a few turns on the terrace whilst waiting for the carriage. The fresh air, she said, did her a great deal of good, and the country was looking so particularly lovely, it seemed to give her a new sense of enjoyment.

She talked but little to Katharine, but when she did, her thoughts seemed dwelling very much upon the service, and upon the happiness of joining in it with her husband. This point she referred to more than once, though she could not bring herself to say what was really in her mind, that it would be the first really happy Communion which had been granted her for years. Colonel Forbes met her at the church door, and Jane turned to Katharine, and whispered: "Katharine, you will remember us!" and then she walked up the aisle, leaning on her husband's arm, and he placed her with an anxious and tender care in her seat close to the chancel.

When Katharine looked again, Jane was kneeling at the altar with her husband, as, in by-gone years, she had knelt by his side when plighting him her troth.

The blessing which had then been neglected, was now earnestly sought, and doubtless obtained; and when Katharine herself, kneeling at the same altar, offered the prayer for which Jane had asked, it was blended with a thanksgiving, fervent, it might have seemed, as angels would utter in Heaven, over the lost and found.

"Jane, my own treasure, it has been a very happy day."—Colonel Forbes sat by his wife's sofa, which had been drawn in front of the window. The pale

yet vivid rays of a glorious moon were shining into the apartment. "So happy, Philip, it is almost pain!" And she slightly gasped for breath. "Is Katharine there?" "In the bed-room with the children; shall I call them?" He brought them back with him, and Katharine came too, thinking she was wanted. Colonel Forbes made Philip stand by him, and Lucy sat upon a little stool at his feet. Jane drew them towards her, and kissed them fondly. "Look at the moon, darlings," she said; "is it not lovely?" They had scarcely noticed it before, and Lucy jumped up, and they both went to the window. Colonel Forbes knelt on one knee upon the stool which Lucy had left. "Jane, is it wrong to feel peace when life has been so mis-spent?" She put her arm round him, and said: "When God gives peace, dear Philip, who can take it from us?" "And I will try, He knows it is my wish to try and serve Him," said Colonel Forbes humbly. Jane started up suddenly.—"Are you ill? Are you worse, my darling one? Are you worse?" Jane put her hand to her heart. — "Happiness! but too much." He looked at her uneasily, but the moon passed under a cloud, and he could not see her face. "There is a candle in the next room; bring it, Lucy," he said, quickly. Lucy seized her brother's hand, but lingered in the doorway; she was frightened. "Go, both of you," whispered Katharine, "and I will fetch the candle." Jane stretched out her hand to retain them. — "Kiss me, my precious ones! Katharine — Philip! Oh, God! help me."

When the moon broke forth again, it shone upon the face of death.

CHAPTER LXXVI.

THERE was sorrow at Maplestead,—deep sorrow ; a darkness as of earth when the gladness of sunshine has departed ;—a stillness of desolation, as when the whirlwind has rushed by, and we sit alone to gaze upon the ruin that it has made.

No one saw Colonel Forbes for many days ;—even his children were denied his presence. He did all that was necessary by writing, not by words.

But on the day of Jane's funeral, he left his room, and saw his friends, and conversed with them calmly ; and when he returned home after the service, he called Katharine to him, and talked with her of the plans which he had formed, deliberately, with the sober, unexcited judgment of a man who has faced the future, and steeled himself, not proudly yet manfully, to bear it without shrinking. His eldest sister, he said, would come to him almost immediately. In the mean time he begged that Katharine would, if possible, remain and take the charge of the children. The request was made with hesitation. He evidently feared to propose anything which might interfere with her own private arrangements, though he did not plainly allude to them.

Katharine was only anxious to assure him that the children would be her first thought and her first claim, until they were placed under their aunt's care. They were Jane's legacy of affection, and she could not have borne the appearance of neglecting them. She told Colonel Forbes at once that her time would be free for several weeks ; and then

his mind seemed relieved, and he spoke to her upon other subjects, all connected with Jane, but her name never passed his lips.

It was very touching and grateful to Katharine's feelings to see how he turned to her with the feeling that she could understand him. Little wishes which she scarcely thought he would have endured to realise, even in his own mind, were mentioned to her; and he would even have gone further in his trust than Katharine could see to be right, and would have given her the disposal and arrangement of various questions as to things which had belonged to his wife; but Katharine was under no mistake as to her true position. All that she could do to help, in the way of giving an opinion, or superintending, if necessary, she said she would do, and she did; but the real business was left for Miss Forbes. She was now to be the mistress of Maplestead; and as Katharine had formerly deferred to Jane, so now much more she was anxious to defer to her. As yet Miss Forbes was known to her only by sight, and Katharine could not help feeling uneasy until she had seen more of her—so much of the children's happiness was likely to depend upon her. Report had spoken of her very favourably, but report tells only of the external life, and it is not that which is of importance with children. She was likely to be a great contrast to Jane, and the children would feel this keenly, for their little hearts were very full of grief which they could not understand, and which it required a gentle and loving hand properly to soothe.

But Miss Forbes came, and Katharine was inexpressibly relieved. She was, indeed, unlike Mrs. Forbes in many things; she had not the grace of manner which had given a charm to Jane's least movement; she was more energetic and less timid;

but she had sympathy—true sympathy ; the tone of her voice, when speaking to the children, was gentle and alluring ; to Katharine she was cordial, almost to affection ; and to her brother, reverent and thoughtful. Katharine had always trusted to Jane's discrimination of character, yet a weight had been upon her mind greater than she knew till it was taken from her. Now she felt that, humanly speaking, the little ones would be safe ; and for Colonel Forbes, he could but be left to God's comfort ; none else could reach him. He was very wretched, Katharine could well see that ; wretched even in his wish to do right. His work was to begin alone, and with the burden of a regretful past crushing his spirit. But he did not shrink from it ; he went on steadily, allowing nothing to escape, putting forth the power of his strong will for self-control in small things as well as great ; labouring, almost painfully in Katharine's eyes, to live for others now, as once he had lived for self. The feelings which influenced him must have been very deep, but they were never alluded to. Jane's picture hung in his room, and a lock of her hair was always next his heart ; but the gaze which rested upon the one, the kisses so passionately, and, at first, almost despairingly, bestowed upon the other, were never known.

He was pitied. People said it was a grievous loss, but they added that it was fortunate for him to have a person so estimable as Miss Forbes to replace it. The tale attached to the loss—the spring which had been touched for Eternity was not thought of, at least, at first. Time wore on, and it was said that Colonel Forbes was changed ; that he who had once been proud, was now humble ; he who had once been exacting, had now learnt to be lenient ; that the rigid landlord had become the kind friend ; and the ostentatious patron of benevolence,

the secret, untiring benefactor; that the stern master was changed into the careful adviser and guide; the exacting head of the family, into the patient, forbearing, tender father. But this was in other and distant years, and our path lies with the present.

Katharine Ashton was free. Her task was done. She had taken the straightforward path of obedience to an outward call, and it had led her through much trial, to a peace which the world can neither give nor take away. Katharine, indeed, could not see all that she had been permitted to do; nor how, by working in the place which God had appointed for her, she had influenced those above her; but she felt that there was nothing upon her conscience to regret, or to cast a shadow over the sense of great happiness, which, by slow degrees, as the sun steals upon the twilight, was again dawning upon her.

By degrees, for she could not realise it all at once,—that was not to be expected. And Charles did not expect it. Jane's death, so long anticipated, was a grief to be softened by time, but never forgotten; and anxiety for the children and Colonel Forbes occupied much of Katharine's thoughts. But Charles was very patient with her, and was quite willing to meet her wish of remaining at Maplestead until Miss Forbes should be permanently settled there; and in the mean time a care of a different kind had arisen, which in some degree was useful, as serving to give a new turn to Katharine's ideas.

Letters from Australia arrived very unsatisfactory. John was speculating, as usual. His land was by no means what he had hoped, and required more money spent upon it than he could command. He had suddenly thrown it all into Henry Madden's hands, and embarked in a new undertaking, which, of course, like everything else at the beginning, was

sure to succeed. In the mean time he was begging Katharine to further his plans by advancing money. The letter was written in a very uncomfortable, anxious tone, in spite of his sanguine assurances ; and a postscript by Selina said, that whatever might be the prospects for the future, which John was always talking of, the present was as bad as bad could be.

“What is to be the end of that, Charles ?” said Katharine, as she put the letter into his hands one evening. It was the last evening that she was to spend at Maplestead. On the next day she was to take up her residence with the Miss Ronaldsons, in Rilworth, preparatory to her marriage. Charles looked grave, but not anxious : “The end will be what we have all along foreseen,” he said ; “so it will not take us by surprise. He will come back to England.” “But how, and when ?” “No need to think of that, dearest, except so far as it troubles you.” — “It troubles me mostly for the children,” said Katharine ; “he and Selina carved out their own fate, and they must abide by it. But the little ones ;—you know, Charles, I was always a dreadfully weak aunt in my fondness for them.” — “You shall be a weak aunt still, if you will,” he replied ; “and I will be a weak uncle. Katharine, you know they could never be houseless as long as we have a roof to shelter them.” Katharine smiled gratefully. “Thank you, dearest ; I felt you would say that ; but I do not think so much of the boys. They will be able to struggle on well enough by themselves ; but that poor little Clara, my god-child, brought up so carelessly, and with no prospect of anything except marriage.” — “Would you wish for anything better ?” said Charles, laughing. Katharine laughed too. “Nothing better if it is a woman’s voluntary choice, and she has had plenty

of time to think about it; and nothing worse, if she is forced into it, because it is all she has to look to. I do believe earnestly that one of the things most essential for a woman's goodness and happiness, is to be independent of marriage. So Charles," she added playfully, "the first lesson I would teach little Clara, if I had to educate her, would be that she need not necessarily follow my example."—"As you will," he said, "as long as you don't think it necessary to preach the same doctrine to yourself; but, Katharine, dearest, do you think it would be possible to persuade John to part with her, at least, for a time, till he can see better how his affairs are likely to prosper? We would give her a good Colonial education, and send her out again to them if they wanted her." Katharine paused. "You don't like the notion?" he said, anxiously. "I like it dearly, because it comes from you, and is just like you," said Katharine heartily; "but I see so many reasons why she should remain with them, that there is only one thing which would make me agree to it."—"Her mother?" said Charles. "Yes. How well you guess! I have such a dread of Selina's way of educating, or rather not educating."—"John will seize upon the notion," said Charles; "he has such an opinion of you."—"And it will be one care off his mind," said Katharine.—"Then we will offer it. It is all we can do. We cannot send him money."—"No," said Katharine, quickly; "that would be only adding fuel to the flame; all one longs for is to stop his spirit of speculation."—"And if he once feels that he can come to us for money, there will be no means of stopping it, I am afraid," said Charles; "so in spite of ourselves we must be hard-hearted; but that notion is a relief to me. The letter weighed upon my spirits, and I want no weights now."—"Neither do I,"

said Katharine, affectionately; "I have been longing so for my walk this evening, and thinking how pretty Westbank would look, and how nice it would be to see the new furniture in it. After all, Charles, I am afraid I am something of a child yet." Charles smiled. "That was the first thing which struck me in you years ago," he said; "I like people who know how to be happy, and you always were happy." Katharine considered: "Yes, I thought I was. I was so really, in a way, but I did not know then what happiness might be." "Nor how lasting, we will pray and believe," said Charles, thoughtfully; and Katharine took his arm, and they set out for their walk.

"Westbank is like Moorlands, only smaller," said Charles, as they entered the garden; "and it suits me better for that reason." — "The church is farther off at Moorlands," observed Katharine; "that was always in my eyes one of the charms of Westbank, having the church so close." — "And Maplestead in full view," added Charles; "how well it looks amongst the trees." Katharine moved a few steps, that she might see the window of what had once been Jane's bed-room. "Her rest is sweeter now than it ever was then," she said, turning to Charles, and almost involuntarily she walked towards the church-yard, which was separated from the garden by a narrow lane.

They stood by Jane's grave. It was marked by a large stone, with a recumbent cross; a few flowers were springing up around it. Katharine remained by it in silence. A rush of sorrow came over her, and her heart seemed full, as if it would burst. She did not hear the gate open again, and she saw no one. Suddenly Charles drew her aside, and she looked up. Colonel Forbes had just entered the church-yard. "We will go out by the other gate,"

said Charles, walking on before her. Katharine turned away, yet cast one lingering look upon the grave : Colonel Forbes quickened his pace towards her, and she stood still to meet him. She thought he had something to say ; and he did come up to her, and began in that strained, cold voice, which now so often made her tremble for the volcano of feeling working inwardly. "Miss Ashton, you leave us to-morrow?"—"I am afraid so, sir," said Katharine. He paused, twice essayed to speak again, and failed. At last, stooping down, he gathered from his wife's grave the bud of an early rose, and giving it to her, said, "Keep it, and think of me in your prayers;" and then wringing Katharine's hand convulsively, he turned away.

She did not see him again till she had left Maplestead for ever.

CHAPTER LXXVII.

THE change from Maplestead to the long, low sunny parlour in the Miss Ronaldsons' house, how, great it was! And how different were the mournful looks of every one in the large, luxurious mansion, from the warm, happy, maternal kiss of Mrs. Ronaldson and the hearty delight of Miss Ronaldson, and the quick, Argus-eyed affection of Miss Priscilla.

It was a new life to Katharine, and a new life to those who were to receive her.

To be sure!—such a strange world—as Miss Ronaldson observed, whilst they were standing talking together, soon after Katharine's arrival: who would

have thought it? And Katharine, too, to have played them such a trick!—to be saying ‘yes,’ when they all thought she was saying ‘no.’—“But I knew it—I am sure I knew it,” said Miss Priscilla; “I guessed it at least if I did not know it. Don’t you remember, sister, how I said to you, after Katharine was here that day with Charlie, that they were so odd I couldn’t make them out, and that I thought they had their heads full of something.” “Yes, Prissy, certainly—I remember quite well; and I said I wished it had been their hearts; and you said they were too old for that.” “No, my dear; no, sister, I assure you,” interrupted Miss Priscilla. “When did I say that? When could I ever think people were too old to have hearts? What I said was—I forget now exactly, but I know I thought their heads were full.” “And that they were too old to be thinking of such folly as falling in love, I dare say, Aunt Priscilla,” said Charles, laughing; “but you see the wisest folks may be mistaken. And now I want you to take great care of Kate, and carry her to all the shops in Rilworth this afternoon, or we shall have some delays, because the grand dress is not ready for next Tuesday.” “The grand dress is to come home on Saturday evening, Charles,” said Katharine. “Don’t distress yourself about that; and you shall see it on if you like it; and for your comfort, I will promise you it shall not be white satin.” “White satin! no, my dear, of course not!” said Miss Ronaldson. “Why, Mrs. George Andrews wore white satin.” “And had six bridesmaids, and flowers strewn in the churchyard,” added Miss Priscilla. “And my Kate would not at all like to compete with Mrs. George Andrews,” said Mrs. Ronaldson, kindly. “Kate is not very fond of competing with any one,” said Katharine, laughing,

“as she is almost certain of failure. But, Charles I really do want to make you curious about the dress, and you won’t be.” “And yet you know it is to be your mother’s present, Charles,” said Miss Priscilla. “The very reason why I am not curious,” observed Charles; “because I know it will be precisely what it ought to be. Besides I look forward to seeing Katharine come forward like a new star.” — “In pale lavender silk,” said Miss Priscilla, gravely. — “And a straw bonnet,” added Miss Ronaldson; “though I am not so sure that is right.”

“It is right because I like it, dear Aunt Rebecca,” said Katharine. “You don’t care, Charles, do you? I have an objection to the thought of seeing myself in a white silk bonnet.” — “Such as you used to have to the white muslin and pink bows,” said Charles. “You see, Katharine, I know more of the secrets of your early life than you imagined.” “That was because Selina was such a gossip,” said Katharine. “And because he would always talk about you, my dear,” said Mrs. Ronaldson. “But seriously, Charles, we do all think the straw bonnet is a little too demure.” “Katharine shall do as she pleases,” he replied. “But what is the objection, Kate, to the white silk; I thought it was a regular part of the ceremony. It always has been at every wedding that I have seen.” — Katharine laughed heartily. “I should not so much care,” she said, “if after I came out of church, I might dig a hole and bury the bonnet. But the thing I object to is being seen in it afterwards, and pointed out as a bride; and it struck me that if I were to have a straw bonnet—you know, Aunt Priscilla, it may be a very good one of its kind—I might take out the orange flowers and the other finery which I suppose I must have, and make it

like any other person's, and then nobody would know anything about it. But I don't really care; I would wear twenty white bonnets to please you," she said, laying her hand affectionately on Charles's shoulder. He turned round and gave her a kiss. "Wear anything you like, my darling: you will be first in my eyes whatever it may be."

So the straw bonnet was decided on, and in the afternoon Katharine and Miss Priscilla went to choose it; and Charles drove his mother over to Westbank to make some final arrangements about the house.

They were very busy days—receiving presents, writing notes of thanks and invitations, seeing visitors, trying on dresses, arranging the wedding breakfast. Charles and Katharine did not spend much of their time alone; and now and then, when going to bed very tired, Katharine was forcibly reminded of the fatigues of similar events in the old times, and her thankfulness that weddings did not come every day. Betsy Carter and the eldest Miss Locke were to be her bridesmaids; her cousin, Mr. Davis who with his wife was invited to Rilworth especially for the occasion, was to give her away; and Mr. Reeves was to marry them, and with Mrs. Reeves to join them at the breakfast. Katharine did not ask this herself, but it was the offer of genuine affection and respect. Charles and Katharine afterwards were to start for the North, Charles wishing to introduce her to his former home and his numerous friends. Katharine might have felt this excitement painfully after her quiet, sorrowful life at Maplestead, but that, as usual, she was so full of thought for others that she had no leisure to give to herself. Her great anxiety now was that the Miss Ronaldsons should not be overtaken by all that was going on; and half the discussions which would naturally have been settled in their presence,

took place in a little back room, between herself and Charles, and Mrs. Ronaldson. Katharine felt very much for the latter. Notwithstanding Mrs. Ronaldson's satisfaction in seeing her son married, her own home was broken up by it, for she would not consent to live with them. Young married people, she said, ought to have a home to themselves; they would never understand each other properly if they had not; and it was very difficult for parents to keep from interfering and giving advice, and that caused jars and unpleasant feelings. No, she would remain with her sisters-in-law for the present, as they were kind enough to say they would like to have her; and then, by-and-by, she might find a cottage near Westbank to suit her. At any rate she was living in her native place, and amongst old friends; and with such a son as Charles, and such a daughter as Katharine at hand, she could never feel lonely.

That name of daughter was very dear to Katharine. It seemed to bring back buried feelings, old joys and hopes, which she had fancied would never find their object in this world again. She was a true daughter even then, in the midst of the excitement of her life, and the absorbing affection which every hour became more dear to her. Mrs. Ronaldson was never forgotten either by her or by Charles. She was always consulted, and her opinion deferred to. They never allowed her to feel solitary, or as if she was set aside. She was the sun around which they moved together; and tenderly, the evening before the marriage, as Katharine, sitting at Mrs. Ronaldson's feet, was recounting the little incidents of the day for her amusement, she bent over her, and blessing her, whispered, "There are many Orpahs in the world, my child, but few Ruths like you."

Brightly shone the sun on Katharine Ashton's wedding day, and joyous and hearty were the kind wishes and congratulations of the friends assembled in Miss Ronaldson's long parlour.

And there sat Miss Ronaldson herself, in a cherry-coloured silk gown, rejoicing in her hearty benevolence, in doing the honours of reception as the mistress of the house; and there moved Miss Priscilla, cherry-coloured also, but more youthful, in lace and white ribbons, eager, excited, and nervous, determined that everything should go right, yet prepared to bear up bravely if all should go wrong. And there, from time to time appeared Deborah, to receive whispered orders about jellies and cakes, and to beg that Miss Priscilla would just step out for one minute, to see about setting it all out in the back parlour, or to inform her, in a loud under tone, that Miss Carter and Miss Locke were come, and had gone upstairs to see Miss Ashton.

Five times had Deborah made her appearance on different errands, and three times, at least, had Miss Priscilla offered a hasty excuse for leaving the company, begging them to remember that Deborah was not accustomed to such gay doings, so, of course, she wanted a little training. Time was passing on. It was nearly half-past nine; and at ten precisely the carriages had been ordered to take them to church. Once more Deborah made her appearance: "Miss Priscilla, ma'am; Miss Priscilla!"—the sibillation was audible at the furthest extremity of the room.—"A wonderful basket of fruit, ma'am, from Maplestead, and a note: will you please come and see?"—"A what, sister?" said Miss Ronaldson, who was at a little distance." "Never mind, my dear; don't trouble yourself. Yes, Deborah, I'll come,—our kind friends won't care; never mind, my dear;"—and with another oracular nod, which only had the

effect of aggravating Miss Ronaldson's curiosity, Miss Priscilla adjourned to the back parlour. "A wonderful basket! you may well say, Deborah,—such flowers! and early strawberries, I declare, and melons, and pines: did you ever see such a show? Well! was there ever anything like it? What shall we do with it all? Turn out that dish of biscuits, and put the strawberries at the corner; and, oh dear! there's the clock striking the half hour, and the fly will be here—and what shall we do?" "And there's the note, ma'am," said Deborah. "The note!—where? I had quite forgotten; and it's to Katharine, too. I must take it to her. Deborah, I'll send Miss Carter down to you, and you, and she, and William from the Bear, must help to put out the dishes, and dress them with the flowers, as you can. To think of Katharine's having such a present of fruit so late on her wedding day!" The man made an excuse who brought it," said Deborah—"I don't know whose fault it was; but Colonel Forbes told him he was to say that it ought to have come an hour ago." "An hour or two hours, there's not much difference," said Miss Priscilla;" "nobody ever was ready on a wedding-day, that I ever heard of. But I'm not down-hearted, Deborah—don't think so; it will all come to an end, if we live long enough. Here, give me the note."

Miss Priscilla hastily ascended the staircase, and knocked at Katharine's door. "Kate, my dear—sister—Mrs. Ronaldson—Betsy—please somebody open." Katharine herself came to the door. She was alone, dressed—very calm—very pale. Miss Priscilla forgot her errand in the pleasure of looking at her.

It might have given pleasure to any one. Simple, pure-minded, unselfish, her character was written on her countenance at all times; on her bridal morning and in her bridal dress, with her

bright face softened yet not shaded by serious thought, and the traces of earnest prayer, Katharine Ashton might almost have laid claim to beauty.

A tear dimmed Aunt Priscilla's eye: "God bless you, my child, and give you a happy life, for I am sure you deserve it"—and she folded her in her arms, and kissed her again and again; and then the tear was dashed hastily away, and Miss Priscilla was herself again. "Here's a present for you, my love, just come—a basket of fruit and flowers from Maplestead—wonderful melons and pines, and splendid geraniums; the Colonel must quite have robbed his green house and hothouses. And stay, here's a note, too; that was just what I came for, besides wanting to ask Betsy Carter to go downstairs and see about a few things for me in the back parlour. Where in the world is she gone to?" "She and Mary Locke are doing something to their dresses in Mrs. Ronaldson's room," said Katharine, as she broke the seal with a trembling hand. Miss Priscilla was going, but staid to pick up a paper which had fallen on the floor. "Katharine, what is this?" Katharine took it, and her countenance changed; she trembled and sat down. "Nothing, Aunt Priscilla,—please don't mind; I will tell you by-and-by. Can I see Charles?" Her voice was broken and agitated. "See him? yes, to be sure. But nothing is the matter, I hope." "Oh! no, indeed—nothing; only if I might see him;—I must—if you would only ask him to come to me." Miss Priscilla wondered for a moment more, and went down stairs.

Katharine's impatience would not suffer her to sit down. She stood in the doorway, listening for Charles's step. He came in a minute, and she threw herself in his arms. "Oh! Charles, it is too much. Why did he think of it?" and she put the envelope into his hand.

It contained, not a note from Colonel Forbes, but a slip of paper, on which was written, "A legacy of gratitude and love from J. F." With it was enclosed a bank bill for five hundred pounds.

Katharine was pale, more agitated, less able to think of others when she went downstairs than those who knew her well had expected. Charles hurried her into the carriage, and whispered to his mother not to speak to her; and by the time they reached the church, she had recovered her ordinary self-command.

There was a crowded church — crowded not so much with the rich as the poor; the many whom Katharine had known and aided, for whom she had prayed and worked, and who now were earnest in their prayers that Katharine Ronaldson might be as happy as Katharine Ashton deserved to be: whilst with them gathered others also who had memories of old times, and long-remembered feelings of respect for her father and her mother, and the days when the name of Ashton had been influential in Rilworth. It was very strange to Katharine to be the centre of all thought and interest, to be what Jane had been on her wedding-day; — that day which flashed across her mind, as she walked up the centre aisle, as vividly as if it had been only yesterday. The tale of that marriage had been told; her own was but beginning. Did she tremble?

One glance at Charles, and, oh! what a thrill of confiding, grateful happiness accompanied it; and then, sincere, earnest as she was in every other action of her life, forgetting all but the Great God in whose presence the vow was made, Katharine gave herself to him, in whom every earthly wish was now centred, "for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and health, in to love to cherish, and obey till death."

A yet more solemn rite followed ; and when others had risen and were departed, Katharine and Charles still knelt side by side, lingering in the enjoyment of that Peace of God, passing understanding, which, through His Mercy, had been granted them in His Holy Communion.

In that Sacred Presence we will leave them. The Blessing of God was upon them, and for what further happiness need we seek ?

THE END.

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CLASSIFIED INDEX.

Agriculture and Rural Affairs.

	Pages
Baydon on Valuing Rents, etc.	5
Caird's Letters on Agriculture	7
Cecil's Stud Farm	7
Loudon's Encyclopædia of Agriculture	14
" Self-Instruction for Farmers, etc.	14
" (Mrs.) Lady's Country Companion	15
Low's Elements of Agriculture	15
" Domesticated Animals	15

Arts, Manufactures, and Architecture.

Bourne's Catechism of the Steam Engine	6
" On the Screw Propeller	6
Brande's Dictionary of Science, etc.	6
Chevreul on Colour	8
Cresy's Encyclo. of Civil Engineering	8
Eastlake on Oil Painting	9
Gwilt's Encyclopædia of Architecture	9
Jameson's Sacred and Legendary Art	12
" Commonplace Book	12
Loudon's Rural Architecture	14
Moseley's Engineering and Architecture	17
Richardson's Art of Horsemanship	19
Steam Engine, by the Artisan Club	6
Tate on Strength of Materials	22
Ure's Dictionary of Arts, etc.	24

Biography.

Bunsen's Hippolytus	6
Chesterton's Autobiography	8
Cockayne's Marshal Turenne	23
Freeman's Life of Kirby	12
Haydon's Autobiography, by Taylor	10
Holcroft's Memoirs	23
Holland's (Lord) Memoirs	10
Lardner's Cabinet Cyclopædia	13
Maunder's Biographical Treasury	16
Memoir of the Duke of Wellington	23
" Lord Peterborough	18
Merivale's Memoirs of Cicero	16
Russell's Memoirs of Moore	17
" Life of Lord William Russell	19

	Pages
Southey's Life of Wesley	21
" Life and Correspondence	21
Stephen's Ecclesiastical Biography	22
Taylor's Loyola	22
" Wesley	22
Townsend's Eminent Judges	24
Waterton's Autobiography and Essays	24

Books of General Utility.

Acton's (Eliza) Cookery	5
Black's Treatise on Brewing	6
Cabinet Gazetteer	7
" Lawyer	7
Cust's Invalid's Own Book	8
Hints on Etiquette	10
Hudson's Executor's Guide	11
" On Making Wills	11
Lardner's Cabinet Cyclopædia	13
Loudon's Self Instruction	14
" Lady's Companion	15
" (Mrs.) Amateur Gardener	15
Maunder's Treasury of Knowledge	16
" Biographical Treasury	16
" Scientific Treasury	16
" Treasury of History	16
" Natural History	16
Pocket and the Stud	10
Pycroft's English Reading	19
Rreece's Medical Guide	19
Rich's Companion to Latin Dictionary	19
Riddle's Latin Dictionaries	19
Richardson's Art of Horsemanship	19
Roget's English Thesaurus	19
Rowton's Debater	19
Short Whist	21
Thomson's Interest Tables	22
Traveller's Library	23
Webster's Domestic Economy	24
Willich's Popular Tables	24
Willmot's Abridgment of Blackstone's Commentaries	24

Botany and Gardening.

Conversations on Botany	7
Hooker's British Flora	11
" Guide to Kew Gardens	11

	Pages
Lindley's Introduction to Botany -	14
" Theory of Horticulture -	14
Loudon's Hortus Britannicus -	14
" (Mrs.) Amateur Gardener -	15
" Self-Instruction for Gardeners -	14
" Encyclopædia of Trees & Shrubs -	14
" " Gardening -	14
" " Plants -	14
Rivers's Rose Amateur's Guide -	19

Chronology.

Blair's Chronological Tables -	6
Bunsen's Ancient Egypt -	7
Haydn's Bentson's Index -	10
Nicolas's Chronology of History -	13

Commerce and Mercantile Affairs.

Bewley's Decimal Interest Tables -	5
Francis On Life Assurance -	9
Lorimer's Letters to a Young Master Mariner -	14
M'Culloch's Commerce and Navigation -	15
Steel's Shipmaster's Assistant -	22
Thomson's Interest Tables -	22

Criticism, History, and Memoirs.

Austin's Germany -	5
Balfour's Sketches of Literature -	5
Belfast's English Poets -	5
Blair's Chron. and Historical Tables -	6
Bunsen's Ancient Egypt -	7
" Hippolytus -	6
Burton's History of Scotland -	7
Chalybaeus's Modern Speculative Philosophy -	7
Conybeare and Howson's St. Paul -	8
Eastlake's History of Oil Painting -	9
Erskine's History of India -	9
Felice's French Protestants -	8
Francis's Annals of Life Assurance -	9
Gleig's Leipzig Campaign -	23
Gurney's Historical Sketches -	9
Hamilton's Essays from the Edinburgh Review -	10
Haydon's Autobiography, by Taylor -	10
Holland's (Lord) Foreign Reminiscences -	10
" Whig Party -	10
Jeffrey's (Lord) Contributions -	12
Kemble's Anglo-Saxons in England -	12
Lardner's Cabinet Cyclopædia -	13
Macaulay's Crit. and Hist. Essays -	15
" History of England -	15
" Speeches -	15
Mackintosh's Miscellaneous Works -	15
" History of England -	15
M'Culloch's Geographical Dictionary -	15
Martineau's Church History -	16
Maunder's Treasury of History -	16
Memoir of the Duke of Wellington -	23
Merivale's History of Rome -	16
" Roman Republic -	16
Milner's Church History -	16
Moore's (Thomas) Memoirs, etc. -	17
Mure's Greek Literature -	17
Ranke's Ferdinand and Maximilian -	23
Rich's Companion to Latin Dictionary -	19
Riddle's Latin Dictionaries -	19
Rogers's Essays from Edinburgh Review -	19

	Pages
Roget's English Thesaurus -	19
Russell's (Lady Rachel) Letters -	19
" Life of Lord William Russell -	19
St. John's Indian Archipelago -	20
Schmitz's History of Greece -	20
Sinclair's Popish Legends -	21
Smith's Sacred Annals -	21
Southey's The Doctor etc. -	22
Stephen's Ecclesiastical Biography -	22
" Lectures on the History of France -	22
Sydney Smith's Works -	21
" Lectures on Moral Philosophy -	21
Taylor's Loyola -	22
" Wesley -	22
Thirlwall's History of Greece -	22
Townsend's State Trials -	24
Turkey and Christendom -	23
Turner's Anglo-Saxons -	24
" Middle Ages -	24
" Sacred History of the World -	24
Zumpt's Latin Grammar -	24

Geography and Atlases.

Butler's Geography and Atlases -	7
Cabinet Gazetteer -	7
Hall's Large Library Atlas -	10
Hughes's Australasian Colonies -	23
Johnston's General Gazetteer -	12
M'Culloch's Geographical Dictionary -	15
Murray's Encyclopædia of Geography -	18
Sharp's British Gazetteer -	20

Juvenile Books.

Amv Herbert -	20
Calling, etc. of a Governess -	7
Corner's Children's Sunday Book -	8
Earl's Daughter (The) -	20
Experience of Life -	20
Gertrude -	20
Howitt's Boy's Country Book -	11
" (Mary) Children's Year -	11
Laneton Parsonage -	20
Mrs. Marcet's Conversations -	16
Margaret Percival -	20
Pycroft's English Reading -	19

Medicine and Surgery.

Bull's Hints to Mothers -	6
" Management of Children -	6
Copland's Dictionary of Medicine -	8
Cust's Invalid's Own Book -	8
Holland's Mental Physiology -	11
Latham On Diseases of the Heart -	12
Little on Treatment of Deformities -	14
Moore On Health, Disease, and Remedy -	17
Pereira On Food and Diet -	18
Reece's Medical Guide -	19

Miscellaneous and General Literature.

Austin's Sketches of German Life -	5
Calling, etc. of a Governess -	7
Carlisle's Lectures and Addresses -	23
Chalybaeus's Modern Speculative Philosophy -	7
Defence of Eclipse of Faith -	9
Eclipse of Faith -	9
Greg's Essays on Political and Social Science -	9

	Pages
Haydn's Book of Dignities - - -	10
Hole's Essay on Mechanics' Institutions - - -	10
Holland's Mental Physiology - - -	11
Hooker's Kew Guide - - -	11
Howitt's Rural Life of England - - -	11
Visits to Remarkable Places - - -	11
Jameson's Commonplace Book - - -	12
Jeffrey's (Lord) Contributions - - -	12
London's Lady's Country Companion - - -	15
Macaulay's Critical and Historical Essays - - -	15
Speeches - - -	15
Mackintosh's (Sir J.) Miscellaneous Works - - -	15
Memoirs of a Maitre d'Armes - - -	23
Maitland's Church in the Catacombs - - -	16
Pascal's Works, by Pearce - - -	18
Pycroft's English Reading - - -	19
Report on Industrial Instruction - - -	11
Rich's Companion to Latin Dictionary - - -	19
Riddle's Latin Dictionaries - - -	19
Rowton's Debater - - -	19
St. John's Nemesis of Power - - -	20
Schoolmaster's Difficulties - - -	20
Seaward's Narrative of his Shipwreck - - -	20
Sir Roger De Coverley - - -	21
Smith's (Rev. Sydney) Works - - -	21
Southey's Common-Place Books - - -	21
The Doctor etc. - - -	22
Souvestre's Attic Philosopher - - -	23
Confessions of a Working Man - - -	23
Stephen's Essays - - -	22
Stow's Training System - - -	22
Thomson's Outline of the Laws of Thought - - -	22
Townsend's State Trials - - -	24
Willich's Popular Tales - - -	24
Zumpt's Latin Grammar - - -	24

Natural History in General.

Catlow's Popular Conchology - - -	7
Ephemera and Young on the Salmon - - -	9
Gosse's Natural History of Jamaica - - -	9
Kemp's Natural History of Creation - - -	23
Kirby and Spence's Entomology - - -	12
Lee's Elements of Natural History - - -	12
Maunder's Treasury of Natural History - - -	16
Murton's Shells of the British Islands - - -	24
Waterson's Essays on Natural History - - -	24
Youatt's The Dog - - -	24
The Horse - - -	24

1-Volume Encyclopædias and Dictionaries.

Blaine's Rural Sports - - -	6
Brande's Science, Literature, and Art - - -	6
Copland's Dictionary of Medicine - - -	8
Cresy's Civil Engineering - - -	8
Gwilt's Architecture - - -	9
Johnston's Geographical Dictionary - - -	12
London's Agriculture - - -	14
Rural Architecture - - -	14
Gardening - - -	14
Plants - - -	14
Trees and Shrubs - - -	14
M'Culloch's Geographical Dictionary - - -	15
Dictionary of Commerce - - -	15
Murray's Encyclopædia of Geography - - -	18
Sharp's British Gazetteer - - -	20
Ure's Dictionary of Arts, etc. - - -	24
Webster's Domestic Economy - - -	24

Religious and Moral Works.

Amy Herbert - - -	20
Bloomfield's Greek Testament - - -	6
Annotations on ditto - - -	6

	Pages
Calling and Responsibilities of a Governess - - -	7
Calvert's Wife's Manual - - -	7
Conybeare and Howson's St. Paul - - -	8
Corner's Sunday Book - - -	8
Dale's Domestic Liturgy - - -	8
Defence of <i>Eclipse of Faith</i> - - -	9
Discipline - - -	9
Earl's Daughter (The) - - -	20
Eclipse of Faith - - -	9
Englishman's Greek Concordance - - -	9
Heb. and Chald. Concord. - - -	9
Experience of Life (The) - - -	20
Félice's French Protestants - - -	8
Gertrude - - -	20
Harrison's Light of the Forge - - -	10
Hook's (Dr.) Lectures on Passion Week - - -	11
Horne's Introduction to Scriptures - - -	11
Abridgment of ditto - - -	11
Jameson's Sacred Legends - - -	12
Monastic Legends - - -	12
Legends of the Madonna - - -	12
Jeremy Taylor's Works - - -	12
Kippis's Hymns - - -	12
Laneton Parsonage - - -	20
Letters to My Unknown Friends - - -	14
on Happiness - - -	12
Litton's Church of Christ - - -	14
Maitland's Church in the Catacombs - - -	16
Margaret Percival - - -	20
Martineau's Church History - - -	16
Milner's Church of Christ - - -	16
Montgomery's Original Hymns - - -	16
Moore On the Use of the Body - - -	17
Soul and Body - - -	17
's Man and his Motives - - -	17
Neale's Closing Scene - - -	18
Resting Places of the Just - - -	18
Riches that bring no Sorrow - - -	18
Risen from the Raiks - - -	18
Newman's (J. H.) Discourses - - -	18
Ranke's Ferdinand and Maximilian - - -	23
Readings for Lent - - -	20
Confirmation - - -	20
Robinson's Lexicon to the Greek Testament - - -	19
Saints our Example - - -	20
Self-Denial - - -	20
Sermon on the Mount, Illuminated - - -	20
Sinclair's Journey of Life - - -	21
Popish Legends - - -	21
Smith's (Sydney) Moral Philosophy - - -	21
(G.) Sacred Annals - - -	21
Southey's Life of Wesley - - -	21
Stephen's (Sir J.) Ecclesiastical Biography - - -	21
Taylor's Loyola - - -	22
Wesley - - -	22
Thumb Bible (The) - - -	24
Turner's Sacred History - - -	24

Poetry and the Drama.

Arnold's Poems - - -	5
Aikin's (Dr.) British Poets - - -	5
Baillie's (Joanna) Poetical Works - - -	5
Belfast's Lectures on the English Poets - - -	5
Bode's Ballads from Herodotus - - -	6
Calvert's Wife's Manual - - -	7
Flowers and their Kindred Thoughts - - -	18
Goldsmith's Poems, illustrated - - -	9
Kippis's Hymns - - -	12
L. E. L.'s Poetical Works - - -	12
Linwood's Anthologia Oxoniensis - - -	14
Macaulay's Lays of Ancient Rome - - -	15
Montgomery's Poetical Works - - -	17
Original Hymns - - -	16

	Pages		Pages
Moore's Poetical Works - - -	17	Cecil's Stable Practice - - -	7
„ Lalla Rookh - - -	17	„ Records of the Chase - - -	7
„ Irish Melodies - - -	17	„ Stud Farm - - -	7
„ Songs and Ballads - - -	17	The Cricket Field - - -	8
Roby's Poetical Remains - - -	19	Ephemera on Angling - - -	9
Shakespeare, by Bowdler - - -	21	„ 's Book of the Salmon - - -	9
„ 's Sentiments and Similes - - -	11	The Hunting Field - - -	10
Southey's Poetical Works - - -	21	Loudon's Lady's Country Companion - - -	15
„ British Poets - - -	21	Pocket and the Stud - - -	10
Swain's English Melodies - - -	22	Practical Horsemanship - - -	10
„ Letters of Laura D'Auverne - - -	22	Pulman's Fly-Fishing - - -	19
Thomson's Seasons, illustrated - - -	22	Richardson's Horsemanship - - -	19
Thornton's Zohrab - - -	22	St John's Sporting Rambles - - -	20
Watts's Lyrics of the Heart - - -	24	Stable Talk and Table Talk - - -	10
		Stonehenge on the Greyhound - - -	22
		The Stud, for Practical Purposes - - -	10

Political Economy & Statistics.

Banfield's Statistical Companion - - -	5
Caird's Letters on Agriculture - - -	7
Francis on Life Assurance - - -	9
Greg's Essays on Political and Social Science - - -	9
Laing's Notes of a Traveller - - -	12
„ Notes Denmark and the Duchies - - -	12
M'Culloch's Geographical, Statistical, etc. Dictionary - - -	15
„ Dictionary of Commerce - - -	15
„ London - - -	23
„ Statistics of the British Empire - - -	15
Marcel's Political Economy - - -	16
Willich's Popular Tales - - -	24

The Sciences in General and Mathematics.

Bourne's Catechism of the Steam Engine - - -	6
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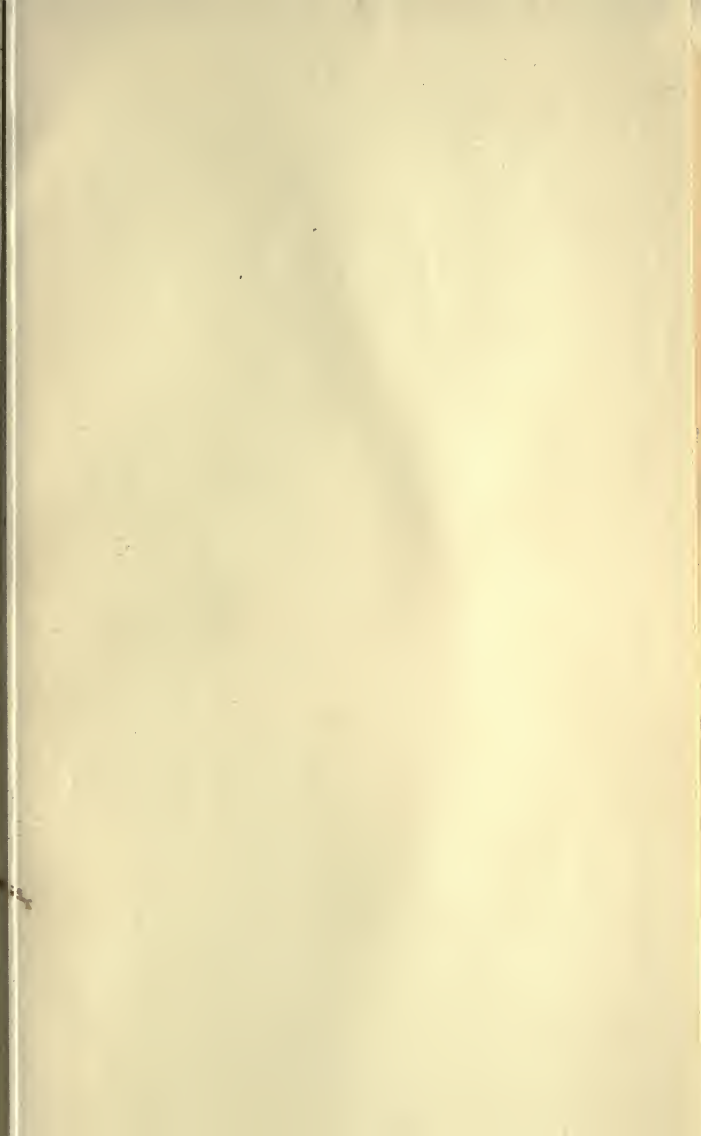
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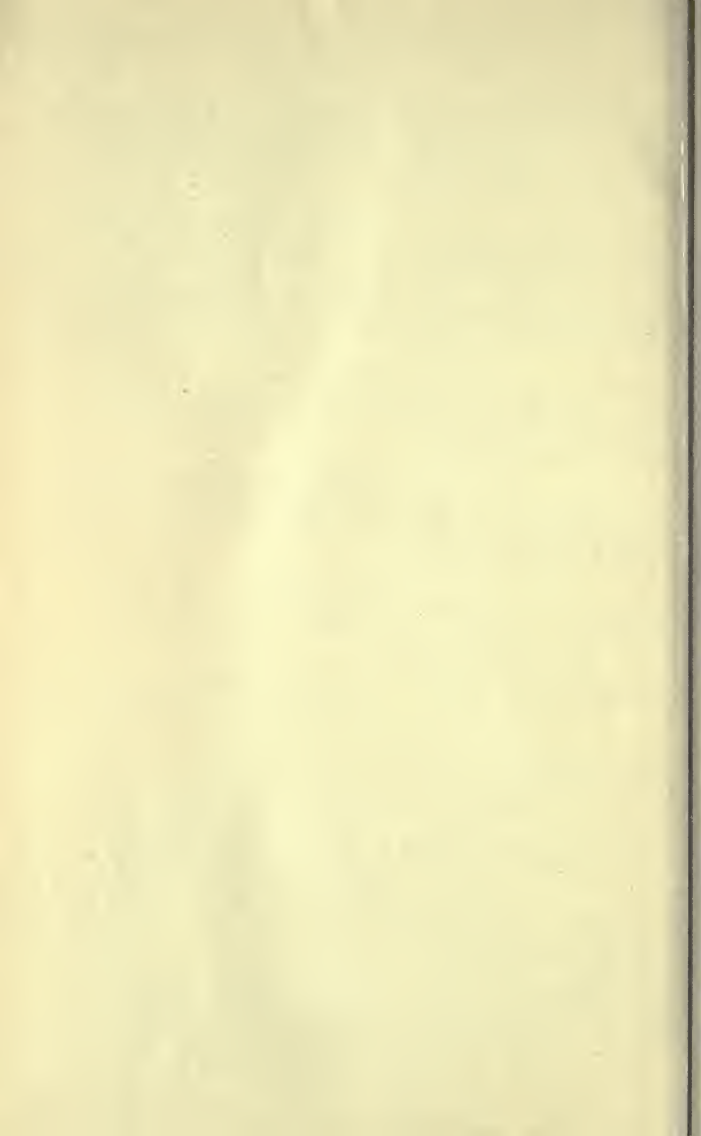
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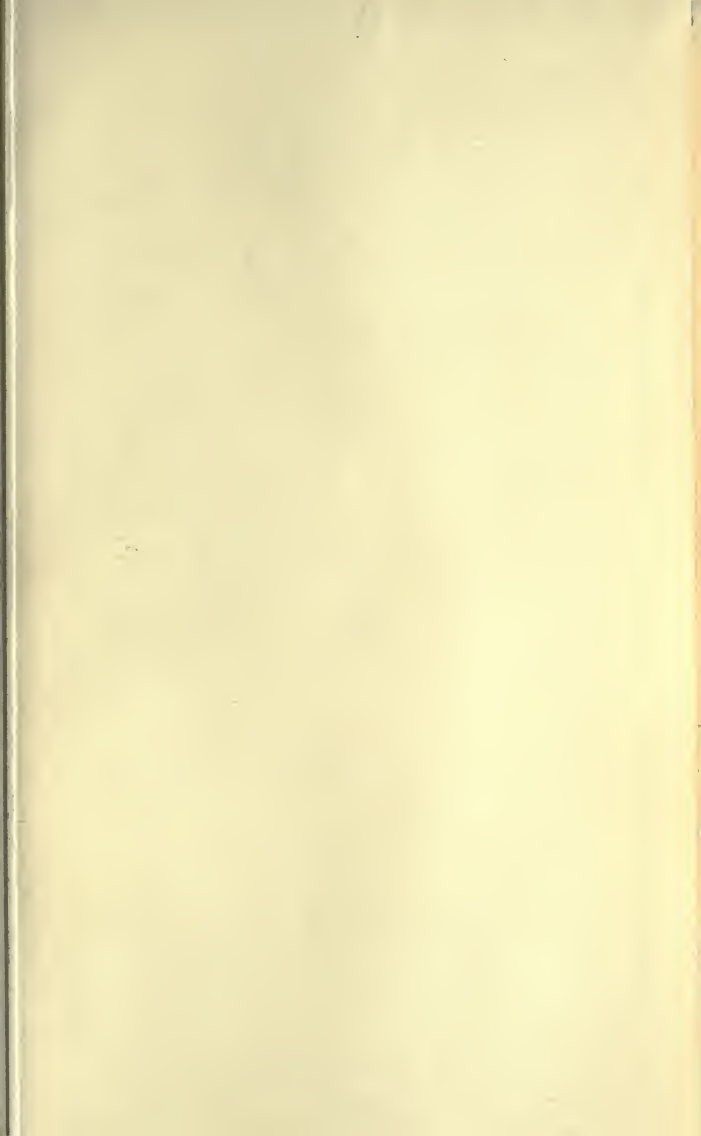
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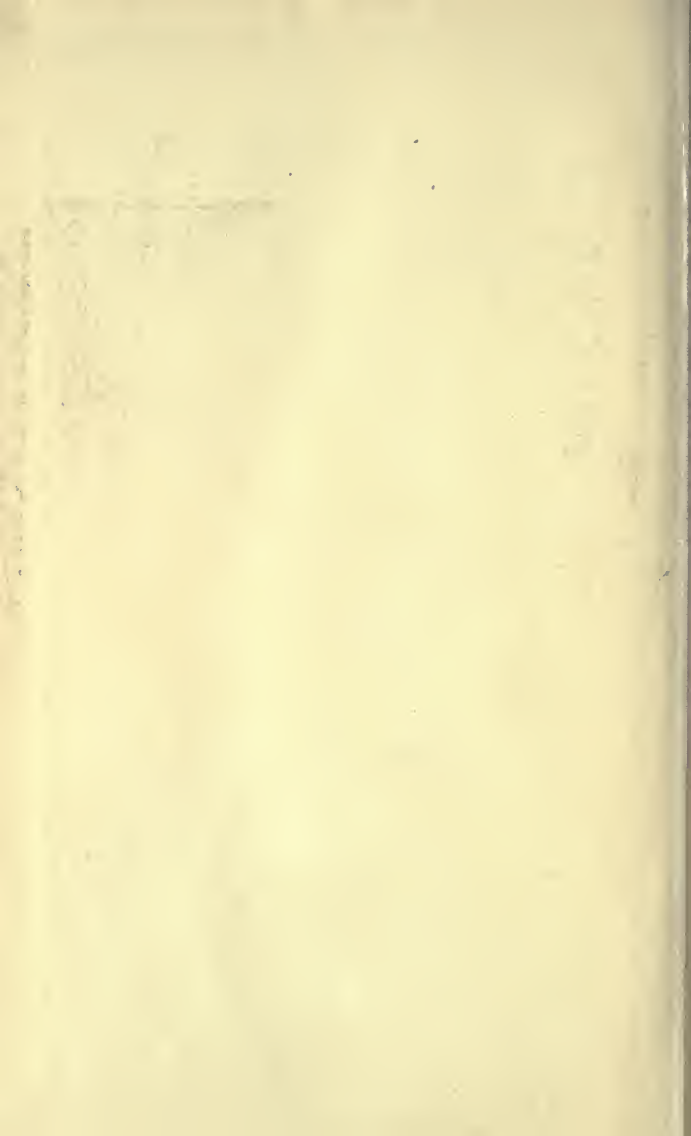
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